

Ward 7 Councilmember Candidate Questionnaire

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the 2024 Ward 7 Democrats Candidate Forum for candidates in the Democratic Primary for the **Ward 7 Council seat**. Below is a pre-Forum questionnaire that will give you the opportunity to expand on your position and goals in depth and afford our membership the opportunity to truly understand your positions.

Please respond no later than **11:59 pm on Wednesday, March 13, 2024**. **Timely completion and submission of this questionnaire is a prerequisite to participate in the Candidate Forum.**

Candidate Information

Your responses will be posted on the Ward 7 Dems webpage. Please provide a headshot of the candidate.

Candidate Name: **Villareal “VJ” Johnson**

Current Neighborhood: **Ward 7, Hillcrest**

Candidate website: VJ@Vjforward7.com

Candidate Twitter: <https://twitter.com/vj4ward7>

Candidate IG: @VJ4ward7

Candidate Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61555883287114>

YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC3VkIZPJUtxT6OnzV03vTaw>

Other social media: TikTok: <https://www.tiktok.com/@vj4ward7>

General Questions

- 1. What makes you the right selection for the Democratic nomination for Ward 7 Councilmember?**

The timing of this moment makes me the right selection for the Democratic nomination for Ward 7 Councilmember. The retirement of Vincent Gray will leave a significant void for Ward 7, the DC Council and the District of Columbia.

My 20 plus years of diverse experience both as a professional and also as a volunteer provides me with the opportunity to offer the greatest impact for the residents and neighborhoods of Ward 7. It clearly shows why I am the right fit!

Vincent Gray and I both entered the electoral politics of Ward 7 in 2002. I served as a volunteer precinct captain for 111, St Xavier’s church. CM Gray served as a senior statesman, after he held the position as an executive leader for several major local and national nonprofits. In addition, CM Gray was an agency lead under Mayor Pratt Kelly. My path started initially with me serving as a youth development programmer, social studies teacher and community organizer. We worked together and synchronized our efforts to best serve our friends, neighbors and residents of Ward 7. I served as a co-lead with CM Gray on several of his key initiatives.

As the Executive Director of the DC Young Democrats, I supported CM Gray’s efforts to work in bringing a younger Democratic participant community to the local party, by helping with the development of high school chapters. I chaired the Lorraine Whitlock dinner, while he served as an event host chair. That year we exceeded our goal and raised over \$25K, along with the highest number of attendees, close to 400. The highlight of this event was the number of scholarships that we were able to present to Ward 7 high school graduates to ensure they continued on in their education journey. We presented 4 scholarships that were \$2K each; an amazing accomplishment for our youth of Ward 7.

CM Gray supported me as an ANC, while we worked diligently to allow the youth of the Twining Neighborhood to use the DC Therapeutic Recreation Center after 3:30 when specialized programming ended; this was the first of many collaborations when I influenced him and the office to make government work for the needs and wants of residents. This work, 17 years later resulted in the new \$40 million Joy Evans Therapeutic Recreation Center, which is a regional standard. While a member of ANC 7A, I worked with him on the following projects, The Nationals Baseball Academy and the Fort Dupont Ice

Arena, assisting with stakeholder and community engagement to raise awareness, funds and participation.

As the Chair of an Advisory Neighborhood Commission, I tirelessly worked and supported his efforts with his programs around youth development along with crime prevention and intervention. I motivated and organized youth to participate in his hearings and provide testimony on their needs and wants as a youth growing up in Ward 7. I established midnight basketball leagues, investments in innovative youth development programming in the communities of Kenilworth, Benning Terrace and Randle Highlands to name a few. While CM Gray served as the DC Mayor, I worked with him and his quarterly ANC meetings and introduced new technology that we were using at the ANC level. This technology became the foundation of the current system that ANCs use to upload their resolutions to share with the mayor, agency leaders and council members.

Since his return to council in 2016, we have partnered on several key initiatives in health care, education and recreation as well as on Economic Development projects like retaining the Safeway at the Good Hope Marketplace and Skyland Town Center project final phase to build the 126 townhomes. I also stepped up to assist him and the Ward with expanding the territory and population of Ward 7, which yielded 9,400 new residents and over 7,000 new age eligible voters. I also worked with his office, and core supporters to defend him and the Ward while fighting for the Health Care committee.

2. How would you build relationships with the Council, Mayor, and Ward 7 Candidates who were unsuccessful in their bid to ensure that the needs of Ward 7 residents are met?

With over 20 years of relationships already, I will be maintaining existing relationships and moreover leveraging those relationships for the good of Ward 7 residents and neighborhoods. I am a 5 term ANC commissioner and a political operative that knows agency leaders and council members extremely well. Moreover, I have solid relationships with key staffers who actually get the work done. As the current President of Hillcrest Community Civic Association, I have fostered and developed more relationships being on the executive and council level and into the special interest and stakeholder communities responsible for leveraging opportunity for impact and service.

My relationships with the council and the executive began with my involvement in Ward 7, while CM Chavous was Ward 7 and Tony Williams was Mayor. Working with them both around recreational, education and development matters. For over two decades I have been making Ward 7 viable by building bridges and connecting people to what they want and need. I am the only candidate with this message in addition to having over 20 years of solid experience and a background of accomplishments would ensure that key relationships throughout Ward 7 and the DC Council would be nurtured and maintained.

Education

In recent years, Ward 7 has faced significant challenges in public education, including disparities in academic achievement, access to resources, and support for special education. If elected to the Ward 7 Council seat, what specific measures will you implement to address these educational disparities and ensure that all children in Ward 7 have equitable access to high-quality education and support services?

Yes, I agree there have been challenges. Increasing accountability beyond the status quo and raising expectations for the stakeholder education community to push and fight for the right initiatives that expand beyond more dollars in schools. The challenges that Ward 7 schools face are tied to divestment in Ward 7 education and the lack of investment in the community supports in the vicinity of the schools that remain in Ward 7. College, university, community college and agricultural extension services must be added to the investments of public funds in Ward 7. Opening a UDC continuing education campus in Ward 7 is a start.

In 2012, I used the authority of my ANC Chairmanship to leverage my power and influence to impact the education stakeholder community. I hosted the Deputy Mayor for Education to share the rationale for

closing 6 or 7 schools as the result of the IFF study funded by Walmart. We hosted that meeting at Kelly Miller and over 150 residents, teachers, principals and residents participated in an education stakeholder forum that ended with a call to action and reinvigorated our novated commitment to education. However, we see the mass migration of students from Ward 7 schools because parents are searching and choosing other alternatives.

I will find money and resources to invest to collect data on the “why”. We cannot solve for X if we don’t know Y. I will continue to fight for the return of a Ward 7 middle school at the site of Winston. I will fight to use the Sousa school to do more for the Benning Stoddard neighborhood and school communities. When first envisioned as a vibrant place for recreation and education Ely Place would have been the model for the city, offering a plethora of alternative sports, recreation and educational opportunities. I want to realize that vision. I want Sousa to do more for its students and secondly, I want Sousa to do more for the parents and family and adults of Sousa students. Because Sousa is 25% filled with students, the city can imagine more. It can co-locate with other service providers to help bring resources to the community like adult literacy.

With the power, authority and influence of the council office I would advocate vigorously for the vision of broadband services to support education of Ward 7 youth is a reality. I will look for infrastructure funds to ensure that investments go to parent communities, PTA/PTOs and that those organizations have a plan for using the resources. I will also use dollars to invest in the capacity of these entities for effectiveness and impact. The parent and stakeholder groups need to do more to engage, educate and empower those residents who wish to aid in the improvement of Ward 7 education,

Economic Development

Real economic development can resolve several Ward 7 social ills. For the last 15 years, I have worked to learn and do more for Ward 7 in this area within the means and capacity of my abilities. I am a key figure in the development and expansion of Ward 7 main streets from Deanwood, to Downtown Ward 7/Minnesota Ave to Pennsylvania Ave through my service as a board member and treasurer of the Washington East Foundation, The Ward 7 Business Partnership. As a Council Member, I will listen to the concerns of all businesses and entrepreneurs.

In light of the current economic landscape in Ward 7, as Ward 7 Councilmember, what innovative measures would you propose to bolster economic development in Ward 7?

Yes, more can happen. There are 10 commercial corridors in Ward 7. But there is also a great deal of economic development in Ward 7. Investments need to be made in infrastructure that allow for deeper investment. The Marshal Height Community Development Organization needs more investment in programs and activities. When I was on the board under Hamilton and Thornhill and then Floyd and Watts, I served as Housing and Economic Development chair, I was front and center of a public private partnership that before the housing bust of 2008, we were converting renters into homeowners in Mayfair. There was quality programming with investments that allowed for participants to become credit worthy, employable and prepared purchase condos. In 2020, as a Commissioner for ANC SMD 7B05, I built relationships with the owners and operators of the Good Hole Market Place. There was a threat by Safeway to leave. I took to Next Door and the discussion that resulted was over 150 comments from neighbors. That data was then shared with the law firm that was representing the development. As a result I was introduced to the owners and operators of the Rosenthal and Kodiak Groups. While in ANC 7B I authored the motion that created an Economic Development task force that is operating today. I also learned the leasing schedule of the various businesses to know when leases were expiring.

Housing

I would introduce legislation that would create a protection fund that allows for renters to have security with buying their rentals, whether it's a condo or house. Monies used for rent above the 30% standard for housing cost in proportion to your monthly gross should be set aside in escrow for future use to purchase.

Public Safety

Ward 7 and the entire city is experiencing an increase in crime. What would you identify as the core causes of this spike and what legislative tools would you suggest that could stop the increase and address the root causes?

There are many root causes for the increase in crime. The spike in despair, desperation, anger and hopelessness does not have a metric, and crime is a surrogate. Where anger is a motivation, deescalation training is one solution. Where despair, desperation and deficit contribute to crime providing pathways to a better life is a solution. Where the doors to the church are locked after school, and non-profits are underfunded for the needs they address, greater effort is required. Relative deficit is a root cause but not the only root cause.

The cause of crime in general is a lack of hope and opportunity utilizing traditional pathways. It's a demonstration of a deviation from the mainstream values and morals of compliance, contributions and community.

A legislative tool is repairing the connection between community members and their neighbors. As ceremonial resolutions, recognizing contributions, providing recognition of a job well done under trying circumstances with a thank you, and genuine encouragement, may divert people from despair to hope and a positive effort on their own behalf. Legislators can provide awards and create challenges for members of the community to do more to help themselves—like a reading challenge for youth over the summer, like after school community service based awards for those who excel at helping their neighbors. Legislative tools that highlight the good shine a light on those still trying when others have given up in despair. Providing leadership in public private initiatives, providing gravitas of public office to the efforts of community stakeholder groups, providing a bully pulpit for community activists to draw those at the margin into the mainstream is a prerequisite of public office. Reducing crime by giving people in Ward 7 something else to do by legislation of programs, and access to those programs and accountability of program providers to the people who choose to help build better bridges is why I am running.

Transportation

What do you see as the biggest transportation needs facing Ward 7 residents? As Ward 7 Councilmember, what specific measures and/or initiatives would you champion to improve the transportation infrastructure in Ward 7.

The answer to this question begins with which mode of transportation they use. If it's walking, then walking, except for random acts of crime present the greatest autonomous means. Almost all streets and sidewalks are complete in Ward 7 and come with traffic calming and control measures. If you are cyclist, being and feeling secure is a issue, which requires innovation and intervention that may impact vehicle travel by slowing down traffic with the development of bike lane.

Health & Human Services

What are the biggest health and human services challenges that you see facing Ward 7 residents? As Ward 7 Councilmember, what specific measures and/or initiatives would you champion to improve health outcomes of Ward 7 residents?

The biggest health and human services challenges that face ward 7 residents is that your zip code can determine your life expectancy. The lack of effective health care for elderly health care, and the lack of meaningful enforcement of health care standards for the residents East of the River is a serious problem. Fighting for home health care initiatives that effectively meet the needs of Ward 7 residents, is why I am running—so that no one else has to lose a matriarch, like I did.

Specific measures are (1) certification programs for home health care aides that are local, (2) stringent enforcement of medicare requirements for providing health coverage including maintenance medication; (3) a hospital east of the river with 24 hour care, and (4) resource pooling opportunities for families to assist those who cannot self-fund their care without loss of public benefits.