



Council Chairperson Candidate Questionnaire

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the 2022 Ward 7 Democrats Candidate Forum for candidates in the Democratic Primary for the **Council Chairperson**. 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 11:59pm on Friday, February 18, 2022. **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: Phil Mendelson
 Candidate website: MendelsonforChairman.com
 Candidate Twitter: @VoteMendo
 Candidate IG: @VoteMendo
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 Other social media:

General Questions

1. To the incumbent: What changes would you propose to make in the coming Council Period to improve operations of the Council? What improvements should have been made during the previous Council Period?

As Chairman of the Council I have always strived to improve the body, keeping in mind that three of the most important duties of the Council are: (a) being deliberative in passing legislation; (b) being an independent monitor (oversight) of the Executive; and (c) enabling public comment. Over the years I have increased the Council's central, professional staff to assist the committees. Under my leadership, the General Counsel has hired more attorneys to assist with legislative drafting to ensure clarity and minimize unintended consequences. I have also increased the Budget Director's staff to assist committees with research as well as minimizing fiscal cost. Last year I established the Council Office on Racial Equity, and am increasing its staffing, to keep Council committees sensitive to racial equity issues. I will continue this trend of expanding central support services to better serve our residents.

Also under my leadership, each councilmember has an additional FTE. It is my expectation that this has expanded their capacity for receiving public input and conducting oversight.

I have slowed the legislative process to allow more public input. In the upcoming Council Period I will encourage councilmembers and committees to be in the community more often. My intention is to continue (after the pandemic ends) with online access by witnesses to public hearings. I want to see fewer emergency bills because they get very little public input before being voted on. I am open to additional suggestions. The regular legislative process is slow for a reason: to allow for public input, and public input is critical to councilmembers understanding the impacts of our bills.

2. To the challenger: If elected, you would be the first Council Chair to have never served on the Council before taking office. How would you overcome the significant learning curve to establish yourself as a legislator and as the leader of the legislature in a system where the mayor has significant political and governmental power?
3. The various Council Committees sometimes need to work together to provide effective oversight of the Executive. For example, oversight over the Executive's management of the COVID response effort affected the subject areas of no fewer than five Committees. With the benefit of two years' hindsight, what would you have done differently to provide oversight of the executive's response to COVID-19?

Coordination makes sense; the pandemic transcends different committee responsibilities. But that doesn't render individual committees' responsibilities meaningless. Nonetheless, recognizing the value of broad-range oversight crossing committee jurisdictions, I created a Special Committee on COVID response. The co-chairs are Councilmembers Allen and Gray; they held a number of cross-jurisdictional hearings last year.

Council oversight is only as good as the councilmember doing it and that ability varies (always has) between the members. The Labor Committee (chaired by Councilmember Silverman) has oversight of unemployment compensation and programs to help workers. The Facilities Committee (chaired by Councilmember Robert White) has oversight of procurement (such as the procurement of PPE, masks, rapid tests, etc.) and facilities (such as well as the condition of our schools, including HVAC systems). The Committee on Health (chaired by Councilmember Gray) has oversight of the Department of Health. The only thing I might have done differently is who to suggest as committee chairs and committee members.

Let me add, and this pertains to question 1 as well, there is often a misunderstanding that the Chairman can dictate how members do their jobs. A chairman who takes that approach will not last long in a collaborative assembly such as the Council. Members expect to chair committees, and committees have separate jurisdictions. The quality of their work will vary from member to member. I struggle to improve this but, ultimately, I hold the hand that is dealt by the voters.

4. How can Councilmembers better connect with communities that have lost faith in the ability of the government to solve problems?

I appreciate this question because having the support of communities that one is elected to serve is fundamental to good governance. As long as I have been on the Council, I have made it a point to be accessible to constituents in every ward and every neighborhood. I am known for my availability and willingness to meet with anyone who requests a meeting. I host monthly virtual town halls (that I call "Meet Up With Mendo") to respond to anyone's questions and concerns, and I do not omit any questions we receive. I host quarterly ANC meetings open to all ANC Commissioners. I also attend -- frequently -- community meetings in all eight wards.

Why have people lost faith? I believe much of that is due to Republican rhetoric dating to Ronald Reagan rejecting the New Deal belief that government can and should help people. It's been exacerbated by social media. I believe councilmembers have a duty to be present in the community -- frequently -- and to explain how government can be helpful. I strive to be personally responsive (perhaps more than most), and if I can help with a constituent or move a bill that makes a difference, then citizens will see that government can solve their problems.

5. How would you describe an effective relationship of the Council Chair and other At-Large members with Ward 7?

The most effective way for the Council Chair and At-Large Councilmembers to have an effective relationship with Ward 7 is to be familiar with the issues important to its residents. I am an example. I have always made myself available attending ANC and civic association meetings. Over the years I have pushed for a new hospital East of the River (with a network of community clinics), moved legislation to expand grocery store options, supported completion of the streetcar East of the River, restored funding cuts to Ward 7 DCPS schools, addressed the O Street Wall, etc.

Education

1. Do you believe the per pupil formula is adequate? If so, why? If not, how would you modify the per pupil formula to ensure that all schools are sufficiently funded and facilitate equitable outcomes in communities in Ward 7 and Ward 8?

As the parent of a daughter who recently graduated from DCPS, I know that a quality education is the key to opportunity. That's why improving the effectiveness of public education is a priority for me – so that more kids across the District graduate with the skills they need to compete in the workplace.

The Mayor has proposed a 5.9% increase in the UPSFF. That is significant but still below where the Adequacy Study – done a half-decade ago – recommends. Over the years different “weights” have been added to reflect the different level of funding needed to certain student groups. For instance, I was very supportive of adding an “At-Risk” weight many years ago.

Three years ago almost 3 dozen schools saw funding cuts; two-thirds of them were East of the River. Last year 46 schools faced cuts until the Chancellor restored funds under Council pressure. The problem was not the UPSFF but rather what DCPS does with the UFSFF money, which is to keep too much of it at Central Administration. I am convinced that per pupil funding will not work for individual DCPS schools because the school system is too big, significant funds will have to be held back at Central, and Central will always ensure that it has enough for itself at the expense of individual schools. That is why I introduced the Schools First In Budgeting Amendment Act (Bill 24-570) – to put schools first. The bill will give local schools stability; they will not have to cut teachers because enrollment dropped, say, 10 students. Once schools have a stable budget, we can begin to grow programs focused on students with special needs and at-risk students who need additional supports such as reading tutors or trauma-based counseling.

2. What legislative tools would you advance to improve the ability of the Council to recruit and retain quality teachers?

Under my direction the Council has begun to hold hearings on why teacher (and principal) turnover is higher here than in other big cities. I believe retention is a key factor in improving student achievement. With the COVID pandemic we have seen more stress placed on our teachers, exacerbating turnover. I generally agree with EmpowerEd's six-step agenda: better data including universal exit surveys to understand why teachers leave; improving teacher-admin relationships; improving teacher evaluation and professional development; spending on classroom supports; also providing supports such as mentoring and leadership training; and focusing on hiring educators of color.

Our most effective tool is oversight – focused, informed, and persistent. Let me add: pay is also important, but that is collectively bargained rather than legislated.

3. How could the Council exercise more effective oversight over DCPS?

First, some say that having a separate Education Committee would make a difference. I tried that. I created such a committee in 2013. I disbanded it in 2021 because it was not making much difference. Since DCPS has come solely within the Committee of the Whole I have held more oversight hearings in one year than were held in the previous two.

Second, many people suggest that legislation is the answer, but I would argue that what makes a difference is the teaching in the classroom, and that is not a matter of law.

Third, I have worked to identify key issues that will make a difference in the quality of education. These include stable budgeting, reducing teacher and principal turnover, providing more resources (such as tutoring) for at-risk students, increasing attendance, providing mental health resources to support socio-emotional learning, promoting school autonomy, addressing school climate. Holding oversight hearings focused on these issues forces DCPS to address them. Over the past year I have held such hearings, and more are planned.

4. How could the Council exercise more effective oversight over the Public Charter School ecosystem?

The Committee holds several oversight hearings involving the charter schools each year. Additionally, I meet monthly with the PCSB leadership and, separately, with the Deputy Mayor for Education and the State Superintendent for Education to discuss charter school issues. Our annual performance oversight hearing of all education agencies is an opportunity for members of the public to suggest issues that the Committee should investigate for oversight.

5. Are there any intervention programs you believe should be enhanced or expanded? Are there any that should be curtailed or terminated?

Programs that should be at least supported if not expanded include: school-based mental health counselors; high dosage tutoring -- more specifically, reading supports such as through Literacy Lab; and Out of School Time (OST) programming; These are top of mind. There are other programs I support such as the Birth-To-Three legislation the Council adopted that includes a focus on early childhood education.

Funding for DCPS central administration should be shifted to the individual schools. Also, the Show Up Stand Out program, which addresses attendance, needs to be revamped.

Economic Development and Housing

1. Ward 7 hosts a disproportionately high percentage of vacant and dilapidated buildings and vacant lots. How would you address this issue without inadvertently depriving middle income families of a rare asset?

Vacant and dilapidated buildings and lots are an issue that I have highlighted as Chairman of the Council, and I recognize that this issue affects Ward 7 disproportionately. DCRA has begun to enforce our vacant property statute as a result of oversight pressure I began last year. DCRA is being more attendant to properly classifying vacant and blighted properties. Vacant and blighted properties went to tax sale last fall for the first time in two years. I moved legislation to break up DCRA, which should happen this coming October 1st, so that the agency is better able to focus on issues such as vacant and blighted properties.

If dilapidated buildings are occupied, there are programs through DHCD and the Office of Planning to provide financial assistance for repairs if the occupants are low income. I support the programs and, since OP is under my committee, I ensure its program has adequate funding to meet demand.

You may remember that I fought the Mayor over four vacant and dilapidated houses in historic Anacostia that a non-profit was willing to renovate and put back on the market as workforce housing, if only the Mayor would transfer the properties. Three of those buildings have now been renovated and I would like to continue that initiative on a larger scale.

2. The DC Housing Authority and its Board faced significant challenges in 2021. What changes, if any, are needed to sustain and increase affordable and public housing in DC? Are there any decisions on the allocation of affordable units that deserve closer scrutiny?

I would like to see more oversight of the Housing Authority Board. In three years we have added \$123 million in local dollars to their capital improvement program (which should be federal dollars) and DCHA has not been able to spend the money. This past fall I appointed Raymond Skinner, a well-regarded expert in public housing, to the Board. But the Mayor still controls a majority of the Board.

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As to the broader question of affordable housing, My record is strong and ongoing. I supported a change to the law in 2019 requiring that at least 50% of Housing Production Trust Fund (HPTF) funds be targeted to the construction of extremely low income (<30%) housing. I have also supported significant annual funding of the HPTF. I co-authored the law that requires that 50% of the city's year-end surplus go to the HPTF which, this year, means \$283.2 million. I rewrote the Mayor's proposed Comprehensive Plan (now D.C. Law 24-20) to require that land use decisions make housing, and affordable housing, priorities for all governmental decisions regarding land use; this includes extremely low-income units. There are other strategies I support, such as affordable housing covenants (which I budgeted), a subsidy fund to preserve existing affordable housing, promoting community land trusts, inclusionary zoning (for which I moved Council legislation), and renewing rent control (I moved the legislation). Also to help extremely low-income households: I have authored legislation to constrain the prevalence of evictions, I pushed the Mayor to move quicker with the STAY-DC program, I budgeted more funds for ERAP, and I have taken the lead in budgeting the Access to Justice Initiative which provides civil legal services to low income residents such as in landlord tenant court. I will continue finding ways to increase affordable housing, especially for the poorest of our residents.

As for the allocation of units, we changed the law a few years ago to increase the percentage of HPTF units dedicated to extremely low income (50%) even though the Mayor was struggling to reach the previous requirement (40%). And through the Comprehensive Plan we emphasized the need for more family-size units (e.g., 3+ bedroom units).

Transportation

1. Ward 7 residents and many residents east of the Anacostia River complain about inconsistent access to public transportation. These conditions have been intensified by WMATA's reduced service schedule over the last two years. How would you improve access to transportation for underserved communities during the pandemic? What legislative or oversight steps would you take under normal circumstances to improve transportation equity?

WMATA's reduced service schedule has hurt everybody, but it is a fact that East of the River communities are especially dependent on bus service. I believe that public transportation is critical. There are many benefits: it helps those who cannot afford a car; it's good for the environment; it's a more efficient way for people to travel (passengers per lane mile); it reduces congestion; it's essential for the city to be able to grow as the urban core of the region; etc.

I took the lead, through the Council of Governments, to obtain regional agreement for annual dedicated funding (about \$500 million) to WMATA from Virginia, Maryland, and DC. Most recently I have been involved in discussions with state senators from Maryland and Virginia to legislate 3% annual growth in this annual funding. The point is that I have worked to improve the capacity of our public transportation system – and will continue to do so.

Additionally, as Chairman of the Council I propose who will represent the District on the WMATA board. Since 2019 I have made a point of not appointing a councilmember and instead have looked to appoint individuals who are frequent users of public transportation and who have a commitment to bus, not just rail. Consider my nomination of Stephanie Gidigbi and then Tracy Loh. I am proud of these appointments and, as WMATA Board members, they are in the best position to advocate for transportation equity.

Finally, I co-introduced Bill 24-429, the Metro for DC Amendment Act of 2021. This bill would fund local bus service improvements and establish a transit subsidy for every DC resident up to \$100/month. If adopted and funded (which I hope), that would ensure expansion of bus service as well as financial assistance.

2. What is your position on the potential expansion of the DC Streetcar along Benning Road? If you believe it is a net positive initiative, please explain the potential benefits. If you believe it is a net negative, please describe the potential risks.

I do not support expansion of the streetcar other than that the Benning Road line should end East of the River (not Oklahoma Avenue). While the immediately impacted ANC has advised me in the past that it opposes extension of the streetcar to the Benning Road station, and I think a terminus at the Deanwood Station makes sense, I have not worked against the Ward 7 Councilmember who supports that extension to Benning/East Capitol.

The streetcar project has been very expensive, and ten years ago the public was misled about its benefits. Moreover, the project was poorly planned. The streetcar does not move as many passengers as other forms of public transit. However, the existing line should be completed,

Public Safety

1. The District of Columbia is experiencing a general decline in crime, but a spike in murder. 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?

Every resident of the District deserves to feel and be safe in their own neighborhood and on their own street, and a core function of government is to provide for the safety of its citizens. During the years I chaired the Council's Committee on the Judiciary (which has oversight of MPD and the criminal laws), the incidence of violent crime dropped significantly, and homicides reached their lowest level (88) in 50 years. However, in recent years the incidence of violent crime has increased. I recognize that we must continue to push for accountability in the police force, but also must allow law enforcement to be tough on crime to combat this spike in murders.

The increase here is also being seen across the country. This suggests that the core cause may correlate to the COVID pandemic, its economic effects, and the mental health impacts from it.

The typical legislative tools to "fight crime" are creating new crime categories in the criminal code, lengthening sentences, and establishing mandatory minimums. I don't support any of those and have urged law enforcement leaders (through the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council) to get ahead of the current crime spike to head off any political demand for these supposed solutions.

To reduce crime, the police need to increase their case closure rate, put more emphasis on criminal intelligence, and use "focused deterrence" as a policing strategy. MPD also must be more intentional about building community trust. In addition, the US Attorney needs to be more aggressive in prosecuting violent crimes. I expand on these points on my website: https://mendelsonforchairman.com/public_safety

2. What would you recommend that the Committee on Public Safety and Justice do to improve oversight over MPD?

More frequent oversight. When I chaired the Committee a decade ago, I had multiple oversight hearings on hate crimes, gun violence, truancy, and also used hearings on various crime bills to touch on the issues raised in question #1 above.

3. What programs would you create or modify to reduce recidivism and reintegrate Returning Citizens into our communities?

We know that the lack of housing and employment are critical factors contributing to recidivism. Since a majority of criminals are repeat offenders, targeting returning citizens for successful re-entry has a proactive effect on reducing crime. Therefore, helping them get jobs and housing (and to overcome other barriers as simple as getting an ID) is an important strategy to reduce crime. Last summer I put in the budget funding for Jubilee Housing to create its first-ever housing for returning citizens. The Mayor has yet to get those funds out the door. I'm working with Jubilee to get this done.

Jobs and Employment

1. What legislative tools would you create or modify to increase the percentage of District employees that reside in the District of Columbia?

The law should be clear that preference is given in hiring to District residents, and certain benefits should be provided (such as housing assistance) to government employees who are District residents. Further, there should be more vigorous oversight by the appropriate Council Committee regarding how the Mayor and the Department of Human Resources is effecting our preference to hire District residents. Because, frankly, I don't think the Executive sees this as important.

2. The unemployment rate in Ward 7 is 14%. What legislative tools would you create or modify to improve the ability of the District to restore these residents to the workforce?

This is a longstanding problem, and I see a long-term solution: improving public education. Public education is job training (and I am not referring to vocational education, although that is true, too). A student who graduates, especially with a high school diploma that actually means career/college ready, is a student who is likely to get a job. A high school graduate who goes on to college is likely to get a job with a good income. This is statistically true. In fact, research has shown that pre-k education is a strong indicator of employment as an adult. This is why I have been so focused on improving public education – because it will reduce/solve many of our socio-economic challenges such as unemployment.

In the short-term, the tools we have that can improve the situation are budget and oversight. But there has not been effective oversight by the appropriate Council committee. Millions of dollars lie in the DOES budget that are either not spent or are spent on ineffective programs. To get around this, for this year's budget, I funded several career pipelines through UDC (which is in my committee). I will look to continue this strategy in the upcoming budget. UDC is now standing up programs for students to get degrees in teaching and nursing, certificates or degrees for early childhood educators, and IT proficiency in conjunction with Amazon. There are jobs at the end of each of these pipelines.

Additional Note:

I appreciate this opportunity to answer your questions and look forward to the Ward 7 Democrats Candidate Forum. Many of you know that although I am elected citywide I am no stranger to Ward 7. Over and over I've tried to be helpful on a variety of issues, from illegal construction in Deanwood to the O Street Wall; from vacant and overgrown properties to alleys needing repair; from loitering near Greenway to the need for grocery stores throughout the Ward. And most recently, I made the changes to the Subcommittee's redistricting plan to ensure Ward 7 was at least equal in population to the city's seven other wards.

*I hope I have your support in the June 21st primary.
Thank you.*

