Bill Walczak’s Responses to Create The Vote’s Questionnaire

1) Addressing Citywide Issues

*Just as any other major city, Boston faces many economic and social issues. Can you provide examples on how you would integrate the arts, culture, and creative community in solving social problems? How would you use our community to drive economic development in the city?*

Arts and culture are vital indicators of a city’s overall health, education and prosperity and at both Codman Square Health Center and Codman Academy Charter Public School, I expanded access to the arts for artists and residents of underserved communities. This includes many initiatives that have brought people together around critical social issues and in celebration of Boston’s rich diversity and historical assets; such as the Peace Tile Project, Boston Arts Millennium, Childhoods Interrupted by War, the Dorchester Artist Spirit and the Boston Landmarks Orchestra, among others.

Codman Academy Charter Public School, which I co-founded, won the state’s highest award in arts and culture from the Massachusetts Cultural Council for our pioneering, in-depth partnership with the Huntington Theatre Company, where the theatre has become an “expeditionary learning” extension of our campus. When violence against youth spiked eight years ago, the partnership created the annual summer Shakespeare production, which continues to this day. This Thursday and Friday our students will perform on the Calderwood stage at the Boston Center for the Arts through the Huntington Theatre program.

I have traveled to other communities, from Philadelphia to Belfast, to learn how others have leveraged the arts, culture and the creative community to tackle social problems and build community capacity. I have also participated in health and cultural missions to countries such as Vietnam and Nigeria to share our culture and connect with immigrant communities here in Boston.

Under my Administration, Boston’s new Commissioner for Arts & Cultural Affairs will develop a stream of initiatives specifically to tackle social problems; and as one way to process real-time developments like the Boston Marathon bombing and the Trayvon Martin verdict. This work will happen in concert with a cross-section of organizational and individual stakeholders from outside City government; and like all aspects of our evolving priorities for the arts will be supported by inter-departmental City leadership.

My new Creative Industries Office will work with other City departments to integrate the arts into my economic development plan. For example, I’m proposing a new East Boston Innovation District that could include affordable housing and shared work space for artists. We also will look at adapting the HandMade in America model to assist home-based craftspeople, often single moms, in our economic development, community revitalization and civic health plans; providing the infrastructure, training and wrap-around services for micro-artists to make the leap from limited home-based production to scaled and profitable enterprises.
2) Your Personal Connection

We’ve all had defining moments in our lives. What personal experience with arts, culture, or creativity has had an impact on your life and your view of the community?

As a young community organizer in the 1970s, I experienced firsthand the crime, racial tension and economic struggles of those times. But I saw how the arts brought people together and even built community; from Summerthing, which began as a way to keep the peace during a time of great unrest, to First Night, created by local artists to inspire people to experience Boston in a positive way. So, it made sense to me to incorporate arts and culture into our work at the Codman Square Health Center. One of our first initiatives was a youth art contest co-sponsored with the Codman Square Neighborhood Council. The winning picture was painted by a 12-year-old girl in foster care. Despite all the challenges she faced in her young life and that Codman Square was experiencing as a community, this child saw life, beauty and togetherness. “The Mango Man” picture became an instant symbol of hope; a reminder that people are more likely to succeed in whatever circumstances they find themselves when they have a sense of identity and self-worth, which art can bestow. Over the years, we shared many copies of this wonderful work of art, including with visitors from around the world who spent time in Codman Square learning about our community building work. In the late 90s, a neighbor reproduced the picture onto ceramic tiles, as part of our Peace Tile Project. The picture never gets old for me, and is a continuing inspiration.

3) Arts Education and Programs for our Youth

While the Boston Arts Academy and the BPS Arts Expansion Initiative are providing access to quality arts education, many of our youth are still being left out of the creative community. What will you do as Mayor to champion arts education with our youth both in our schools and in our communities? How will you balance the importance of arts education with the constant pull to “teach to the test?”

The most important thing I will do as Mayor will be to improve the quality of education, with arts as an essential component. We know that arts training improves young people’s abilities to solve problems and work in teams, which are necessary skills for stable communities and in the new economy. Additionally, we’ll link arts education to other curricula. For example, Professor Ellen Winner’s research demonstrated that theatre education increases literacy skills. At Codman Academy Charter Public School our experiential learning partnership with the Huntington Theatre incorporates its repertoire into the students’ reading and writing courses. We’ll partner with Arts & Culture institutions and the creative community on 11th & 12th grade career academies to introduce students to a range of related careers; from musician, to digital arts, to studio recording, to museum exhibit management, to set design, to stage manager. My administration will look to successful nonprofit models like Artists for Humanity and BUILD for best practices for engaging high school students through high quality apprenticeships and micro-enterprise development. We also will elevate and improve career-readiness programming within the Boston Centers for Youth & Families and develop via pathways to creative economy opportunities for adult learners.
4) The New Administration’s Role in the Creative Community

According to research conducted by Americans for the Arts, Boston consistently ranks among the bottom five of the 30 largest U.S. cities in what it annually invests in the creative community. Some in the creative community are concerned about the city’s administrative capacity to program, support, and promote activities. Describe how you will address these concerns in the following areas:

In early June, I committed to a Cabinet-level Commissioner for the Arts & Cultural Affairs. My restructuring of the Office of Arts, Tourism and Special Events will also result in a new Creative Industries Office within a revamped Development Authority to drive economic development related to the arts, culture and creative economies.

Investing in a Development Officer for the arts and related economies will be critical to developing sustainable strategies that draw upon diverse funding streams and leverage powerful pro bono and in-kind resources often overlooked in favor of hard cash. Tapping Boston businesses that are part of the national Billion + Change campaign is one way to do this. Additionally, I’ll create a Municipal Arts Fund funded in part by requiring 1% of the cost of publicly-funded construction projects to be added to the Fund; leveraging the PILOT (Payments in Lieu of Taxes) system; and inviting voluntary contributions via key payment mechanisms; e.g. for property and auto excise taxes.

I’ve spent my entire career working within communities and across sectors to build shared visions, leverage financial and social capital, and engage people from all walks of life to build sustainable solutions for community success; often against steep odds. When we built the new $18 million Gold LEED certified wing of the Codman Square Health Center, we recognized the holistic role of the Arts in a community’s health and well-being by including a black box theatre – a first for Dorchester and for any community health center. My administration will use an assets-oriented approach as we work with communities to use the arts to build social capital, drive economic prosperity and develop unique identities as “arts and culture centers” with local, citywide and visitor appeal. And in addition to elevating our many established traditions, festivals and parades, the Arts & Cultural Affairs Commissioner will coordinate with Boston’s new Chief Service Officer to integrate Arts & Culture into emerging traditions that unify people through service and reflection, such as MLK Day and the September 11th National Day of Service & Remembrance.

5) The Creative Economy

One of Mayor Menino’s signature accomplishments was the promotion of the Innovation District that supports and promotes the creative economy. As mayor, how would you leverage that success and broaden your administration’s commitment to the creative economy to include arts and culture as well as the innovation district? How will you foster an ecosystem which is reflective of the up and coming independent creative community in Boston?

One of my first actions will be to locate a Creative Industries Office within a revamped Development Authority, including a business accelerator for innovative creative economy ventures. For example, we’ll support a network of pop-up stores, seasonal markets, and enhanced Open Studios. We need to engage and leverage support for Main Streets and other business
district leaders to welcome the independent creative community in mutually beneficial way, both established and emerging. As I’ve said many times, every community should be an “innovation district” and integrating the creative community into overall community and economic development plans is critical, starting with my proposal for a new East Boston Innovation District. Also important is to transform Boston into a 24-hour city supportive of the lifestyle and work patterns of a 21st century urban creative community.

6) A World Class Arts Destination
While Boston is known for its hospitals, professional sports, and universities, the city has yet to fully leverage the strength of our arts, culture, and creative community as a means for tourism and branding. How would you utilize our community to market Boston as a world-class cultural destination?

Boston has extraordinary physical, organizational and personal assets around the arts, culture and the creative community. Some are world-renowned icons and others are hyper-local treasures. And ... there is unprecedented potential to do so much more and to make it add up to something truly great. My administration will bring together the creative, financial and leadership resources needed to build and implement that vision, and elevate Boston to be our nation’s preeminent city for design, arts, and culture.

7) Your Priorities
The start of a Mayor’s tenure often sets the Administration’s tone and priorities. When elected, what actions will you take in your first 100 days to provide support and resources to the creative community.

My first 100 days will set the stage for the incredible work we will accomplish together around the arts, culture and creative community. It has been a vital part of transforming Codman Square and other neighborhoods and it will be the same dynamic catalyst throughout Boston. Some of my first steps will be to:

1) Establish a Commission for Arts & Cultural Affairs and recruit a Cabinet-level Commissioner to lead it.
2) Identify resources for a Development Officer to focus on my administration’s arts, culture and creative community priorities.
3) Locate a new Creative Industries Office within a revamped Development Authority.
4) Design a series of charrettes to engage a broad range of Bostonians around ideas for my administration’s evolving agenda for our arts, culture and the creative community.
5) Create and resource a plan to market Boston as a world-class cultural destination.
6) Commission a feasibility study to relocate services currently in the northwest side of City Hall and adapt that space and the adjacent plaza to house a City of Boston Museum.
7) Launch BostonArts.Gov, a citywide virtual kiosk of arts & culture events; including interactive daily messages that reinforce the depth and breadth of Boston’s artistic and cultural history, traditions, assets, and innovations.
8) Launch efforts to locate a year-round retail artisans co-op in Downtown Crossing as one anchor to that district’s revitalization.
9) Streamline permitting.
10) Appoint First Night founder and community celebration artist extraordinaire Clara Wainwright Honorary Commissioner for Arts & Cultural Affairs.

The original watercolor of “The Mango Man” was painted by a 12-year old girl and was a winning entry in a youth art contest co-sponsored by Codman Square Health Center and the Codman Square Neighborhood Council in the late 1980s. A decade later, it was reproduced as part of the Codman Square Health Center’s Peace Tile project.