

2021 City Council Candidate Questionnaire

Completed questionnaires will be public documents available on our website, so put your best foot forward. If we ultimately hold an endorsement vote in your race, we will circulate your questionnaire to our members before the vote.

*Contact with questions: Jessica Thurston, NKD's VP of Political Affairs,
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Name	
Council District number and neighborhoods represented	District 37 Bushwick, Ocean Hill, Brownsville, Cypress Hills, East NY
How long have you lived in the above district?	Since 2009
Why do you want to serve as a member of the NYC Council?	<p>I am running for City Council because my community is facing multiple crises and we lack adequate representation to fight for the solutions we so desperately need. The compounding crises of housing instability, racialized displacement, inequities in accessing clean healthy food, a lack of investment in public transit, and inequities in economic opportunities all call for proactive leadership in local government. I am running to fight for housing for all; for healthcare for every single person in this city; to ensure our youth are nurtured, protected and engaged; to fight for all people in New York have access to safe, dignified work with living wages; and that we have a livable future in the face of climate change.</p> <p>Although I was originally asked to run by local tenant organizers and attorneys in the community, it has been clear to me for years that we need a representative that is not only fully committed to real transformative change, but is emphatically ready to fight for it. I am someone who has spent every day for over ten years working tirelessly in my district for positive social transformation. I have been</p>

fighting for solutions that are not band-aids, but that model the world we want to live in: creating jobs that lift up the most vulnerable, developing climate mitigation systems that help us deal with waste, successfully opening public space for community self governance and development, building neighborhood based alternative political institutions where movements can organize for power, and ensuring a sanctuary space for our immigrant neighbors. As a direct action trainer, I have spent a decade helping groups confront power and running actions in the streets calling for more democracy, more equality, more equity, and the end of capitalism and white supremacy.

The statistics of District 37 paint a grim picture: 1 in 6 young people in high school are homeless, we send them most people from NYC to prisons, we have some of the highest rates of people going to shelters because of domestic violence, we have some of the highest rates of home foreclosures, we top the chart for homes going into a tax lien sale, we have high rates of childhood asthma, we lack sufficient access to clean, health foods, and we have incredibly low voter participation.

However, my experience living and working in this community has been overwhelmingly hopeful, inspiring, and motivating. I came here as a very lost 24 year old; coming from a home with drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence, and cops coming to our house all the time. This community is where I was able to heal, to build family and relationships that showed me the power of people working together. It is where I have learned what it means to have access to local democracy and where I have come to realize the power of an elected leader who values our work and the movements we are in.

My district has phenomenal youth programs,

community-run green spaces that are providing nutrient rich foods to residents, and a strengthening housing movement composed of small homeowners of color and tenants that won concrete wins in 2019. On any given day you might hear about a meeting where people are discussing community land trusts, launching a new political club, or see a parade celebrating ancestral saints. There is an incredible amount of positive work happening in my community and I am running to fight for those long term visions.

As Council Member, I will be a willing partner to movements and to working people and families because I come from a working class family. I was not handed a political legacy. I do not come from unearned, inherited wealth. I am not someone who has been angling to be a politician for years. I have worked hard to earn trust in my district because it has been life saving for me to be in community. I have been effective at building positive partnerships, alliances, and coalitions while being deeply transparent and accountable.

As we work to fight the spread of and recover from COVID, NYC is at a pivotal moment where tangible radical change feels closer than it ever has. Our movements are unapologetic and strong. We saw both an incredibly effective grassroots mobilization to get food and resources to our communities where the city and state failed, and we saw an uprising of thousands willing to risk their lives to demand justice for Black people. We need new leaders who understand this moment and are ready and prepared to turn this moment into legislative wins for working people and families who are living on the margins. We have a real chance to elect a large cohort of women of color who are leftists that can effectively transform the way this city is governed and we believe our campaign directly represents this

	<p>opportunity. I believe my record and my approach to leadership meets this moment and reflects the new leadership we need.</p>
<p>What civic and political organizations are you involved with in the district?</p>	<p>I am a co-founder of the <u>Mayday Space</u>, an award-winning political institution that is a home for grassroots social justice movements (honored by New Kings Democrats in June 2019). Mayday Space has become a place where groups have access to a physical facility that explicitly welcomes them and where they can build power for their movements. It is also now a sanctuary space for undocumented people in need of refuge. In a city where space is at a premium, a space like Mayday is a critical infrastructure that expands access to civic and political work. Each year Mayday hosts over 150 movement and community groups working to build power at a local, national, and global scale.</p> <p>Although not explicitly civic or political to most, I founded <u>BK ROT</u>, which is physically located one block from the district line. The composting operation has hired dozens of young people from the Bushwick Campus Academy School for Environmental Leadership, and many youth from City Council district 37. It serves hundreds of households and businesses from the district that continue to be underserved by the city for organic waste recycling. When DSNY had to shut down city funded compost sites, BK ROT played a major role in filling the gap for District 37.</p> <p>From 2016-2017 I was on Community Board 4 and participated in the Parks & Rec and Land Use Committees.</p>
<p>What have you accomplished in public life that you are most proud of?</p>	<p>For nearly a decade I have been working across multiple movements to create neighborhood institutions while strengthening the ability of grassroots groups to push for and win their demands.</p> <p>I am most proud of the work I did to successfully codify the transportation of organic waste by e-bike into city legislation via Intro 1574 the Commercial Waste Zones</p>

	<p>(CWZ) bill. As the Executive Director of BK ROT, I partnered with a team of organizations working to transform our food and waste systems. We collaborated to push forth a vision of stronger laws for the diversion of food waste from landfills and reducing emissions generated through waste collection. I played a lead role in taking a lofty idea of teenagers and young adults moving waste on bikes and built an alliance to strengthen our advocacy position. I worked to bring our alliance into larger coalitions through building trust. After a three year push, we were finally recognized by the City as an emerging industry that has been successfully given space to grow in the CWZ bill. The microhauling sector we have created is now being formalized as the NYC Microhauling and Processing Trade Association, which launches this month.</p> <p>I have also been a direct action organizer where I work with movements to creatively and symbolically confront power. I have helped organize some of the largest political direct actions in New York City in the last seven years: Occupy Wall Street, Millions March, Flood Wall Street, and Occupy City Hall. I have supported dozens of groups to escalate their campaigns in seeking demands for the wide-ranging transformations we need. I'm incredibly proud to have the opportunity to support people who feel powerless step into a space of feeling confident to speak to power. Through this work I've been so fortunate to grow a wider family and be supported by a growing community of people committed to positive social transformation.</p>
<p>What are the greatest opportunities and challenges facing the district?</p>	<p>District 37 has a lot of beautiful community institutions and grassroots projects that are doing some of those most robust work on youth development, addressing food insecurity, and increasing access to cultural work. I find the community to be very resilient and joyous despite the high level of need that exists.</p> <p>One thing that I'm obsessed with is the work of the East NY Community Land Trust, led predominately by Black tenants and</p>

homeowners who are organizing for collective ownership and determination of land in the district. They are organizing to abolish the tax lien sale, to create a Cease & Desist Zone in Community Board 5, and to win community control over a handful of city-owned properties. I think this work can be extended to more groups to cover the entire district for a bigger coalition fighting gentrification and displacement. I could not be more ready to directly support these initiatives.

When COVID-19 hit NYC, the community here organized very quickly to leverage all resources to care for each other, without the support of a sitting Council Member. The growth of mutual aid efforts covering the entire district is an incredible opportunity to continue engaging people and families that have not been captured by existing organizations and associations.

The struggles people face in the district are primarily related to housing, unemployment, deeply underfunded public schools, and food insecurity. District 37 is the largest food swamp in New York City, meaning that the food sources are overwhelmingly high calorie, low nutrition foods.

The majority of the population is paying over 30% of their income toward housing, and 33% are severely rent burdened. The district has alarming rates of families seeking shelter, mostly families with children.

Homeowners of color are relentlessly being harassed and offered buyouts from speculators for their property. District 37 has the highest number of properties on the tax lien sale this year, threatening the primary wealth-building institution in our community.

	<p>We are one of the highest cash poor districts in NYC and many people and families are struggling to get on public assistance, even six months after COVID hit. District 37 already had many households experiencing food insecurity and now with COVID and the economic recession many households are depending on supplemental food from mutual aid efforts. Additionally, East NY and Brownsville are historically underbanked, with high concentrations of check cashers and pawn shops.</p>
<p>Why do you want New Kings Democrats' endorsement?</p>	<p>New Kings Democrats is a group that I've watched over the years through the meetings and events held at Mayday. I appreciate and value the work NKD is doing to try to remake the Brooklyn Democratic Party into a more reflective, transparent, and participatory party. My experience with NKD has largely been through building relationships with individuals in the group. I was a big fan of the #RepYourBlock Initiative and was impressed by the ability to recruit folks in Brownsville. I think it is incredibly strategic for increasing civic engagement at a hyper-local level. I have been very impressed by how NKD supports its members and their leadership. I think the slate of District Leaders NKD supported in the 2020 cycle is an incredible group that is already working hard to increase democratic participation and create transparency within the Brooklyn Democratic Party. I very much value organizing groups that put time into leadership development and where the wider group has a deeper commitment to not only the work, but to each other.</p> <p>I was very grateful that NKD supported my run for State Assembly in the fall of 2019. NKD was my first endorsement in that race and not only provided legitimacy to my candidacy as a first-time candidate, but also provided volunteer</p>

	<p>support during petitioning and canvassing. Despite the very bumpy road through my Assembly race and this long fight to represent District 37, I have felt supported by NKD and hope to continue building the partnership in the 2021 cycle.</p>
<p>If elected, what will your top three legislative and budgetary priorities be while in office?</p>	<p>I am running to ensure everyone has a safe home, people in our community can live without fear of deportation, and that we have a livable future. Specifically, I will work in coalition to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Fight for housing for all New Yorkers 2. Make steep investments in public services for a new approach to community safety 3. Fight to fund the climate change mitigation legislation for NYC that exists in order to meet our set targets
<p>What is one thing you would do to make New York City government more transparent, accountable, or inclusive?</p>	<p>I am in full alignment with NKD's mission to push for more accountability and accessibility to our democracy. This year, more than any other, has shown us that the New York Board of Elections needs a set of sweeping reforms and new supervision. New York voter turnout ranks near the lowest nationwide due to various obstacles and barriers to registering to vote, changing parties, and voting. Despite recent reforms regarding changing party affiliation and easier registration processes, we need to be doing more to encourage people to directly partake in our electoral process. As a City Council member, I will push for a major reform effort of the Board of Elections, which have proven to be unable to self-manage or execute the logistics of mail-in voting. I will champion things like voting by mail, automatic voter registration, extending voting rights to the formerly incarcerated, having voting days on weekends, and having a citywide voting holiday.</p>
<p>Please review NKD's voting rights platform: https://www.newkingsdemocrats.com/voting_rights. In what ways would you like to expand voting</p>	<p>I am aligned with everything listed in NKD's voting rights platform. I think a piece of legislation that could happen within the first 100 days is the one put forward by Ydannis Rodriguez this year which would enfranchise</p>

<p>access, and how can you do this as a member of the NYC Council?</p>	<p>over one million Green Card holders living in NYC in municipal elections.</p>
<p>What criminal justice reforms would you like to see the Council implement?</p>	<p>My vision for the “criminal justice” system in NYC is for it to be completely upended and reimagined. I believe we must get to a place where prisons, torture, and isolation are not societal practices, but I do not believe that is possible over the next four years. I believe our communities can be safe without the brutality exerted by members of the NYPD. Abolition is the North Star, but there are logistical and practical considerations that take time, including adequately building up the alternative programs and services for community safety and dismantling jails and prisons.</p> <p>That said, I am in deep study about how other cities like Austin, Seattle, and Minneapolis are looking to approach reconstructing their community safety plans. However, I think there are immediate things the City Council should do, such as creating a crisis response team for 911 calls related to mental health crises where police officers are not deployed.</p> <p>The City Council needs to play a leading role in effectively ending the school to prison pipeline and needs to prioritize removing cops from schools. There is no reason cops should be in schools. School Safety Officers are under the purview of the NYPD, and thus represent one of the biggest police forces in the country. We know that Black and Latino students are more likely to be punished at higher and harsher rates than their white peers verbally and physically by police in schools. Disrupting the school to prison pipeline requires moving toward restorative justice and radical trust of our students - removing metal detectors and police are just starters.</p> <p>If we build a coalition to remove police officers from schools, we then have a real option to</p>

	<p>begin divesting from the NYPD budget, which brings me to my commitment of significantly divesting from the NYPD budget and reinvesting in life saving community programs and public services. The \$1 billion divestment demand put forward by the Communities United for Police Reform coalition during the 2020 budget negotiations was a reasonable demand, but it certainly is not enough. Limiting the NYPD budget to end the spending on military grade equipment, surveillance technologies, and shutting down any lingering international outposts of the NYPD are just two examples of where more can be done to divest.</p>
<p>What specific racial justice issues are impacting the district and how would you address them as a Council Member?</p>	<p>Our district is a Black and Latino/a/x community and therefore every city policy has a racialized impact here. We have high rates of unemployment, deeply underfunded schools, high rates of people being incarcerated, and many youth who do not have housing. The reason I am running on a platform that entirely works to address policies that have disempowered, disenfranchised, or divested from the diverse people of color living in my community. This is reflected in my positions on the NYPD budget, on housing reforms, on voting reforms, healthcare access, and mental health care investments.</p>
<p>What is your perspective on, and what would be your plan regarding, the funding of the NYPD?</p>	<p>I support, and have been out front on the issue of reducing the NYPD's budget and reinvesting those public funds into critical life saving public programs and services. I supported the call for \$1 billion in line with the Communities United for Police Reform coalition, but I believe more can be done.</p> <p>The main activity I would focus on for reducing the activities of the NYPD is to remove NYPD police officers from schools. Additionally, I would fight for the restrictions called for by the Communities United for Police Reform coalition are: transfer traffic controllers to the Department of Transportation; limit the</p>

	<p>purchasing power for military grade equipment and surveillance technology; cut overtime; cut NYPD youth programs; significantly cut the number of NYPD Transit Officers; cut the PR budget significantly; and put the cost of NYPD misconduct settlements into the NYPD's budget expenses.</p>
<p>What housing issues specific to your council district concern you most, and how would you address them if elected?</p>	<p>The top housing concern in my community is the lack of housing that is affordable to our community based on the local income levels. Consequently, many working people and families are being displaced, and their units renovated and turned into tiny storage closets that no one should have to live in. Buildings are owned by distant corporations that refuse to rent to Black and Latino/a/x families, and immigrant families. Homeowners of color who are elderly are struggling to hold onto their homes because they are being slammed with rising property taxes fueled by speculation.</p> <p>Here is a list of positions we have publicly taken to ensure housing for every single New Yorker, including: Support the call for <u>Universal Affordable Housing</u> program, implementing comprehensive reforms to the <u>NYC tax lien sale</u>; fight for the creation and construction of a minimum of <u>30,000 units</u> of truly affordable housing for the most vulnerable New Yorkers; work to accelerate the creation of the already-committed 15,000 units of supportive housing to be completed by 2025 rather than 2030 while focusing on a Housing First approach to expedite placements; demand a <u>comprehensive plan framework</u> that looks at planning the city as a whole and incorporates economic, climate resiliency, and infrastructure needs instead of relying on one-off rezoning battles; support a just and <u>equitable property tax reform</u> to bring tax relief to small homeowners in communities of color; swiftly identify vacant properties that can be developed into truly, permanently affordable</p>

	<p>housing as called for in the <u>Housing Not Warehousing Act</u>; fight to restore funding and fully fund the <u>Basement Apartment Conversion program for small homeowners</u>; work to eliminate the 421a tax abatement, which costs NYC \$1.6 billion per year and has <u>failed to provide</u> truly affordable housing; support new <u>community land trusts</u> and cooperative home ownership initiatives to keep housing permanently affordable and build residents' power; and fight for a <u>New York Homes Guarantee</u> to ensure housing for all, including strengthening and expanding rent regulated housing, fighting for taxes on the ultra wealthy to fund supportive and social housing initiatives, and passing common-sense legislation to protect residents from eviction and harassment.</p>
<p>Do you support cancelling rent for tenants and small business owners during the COVID-19 pandemic?</p>	<p>Yes.</p>
<p>What will you do to help reach more gender equity within the NYC Council?</p>	<p>I intend to campaign and govern in coalition - with what I hope will be the most diverse incoming council class in our City's history. If elected, one of the most important things we can do as council members is to hire and cultivate more women - and specifically women of color - in the council staff - to create a pipeline of leadership within city government and the Council. More broadly, I plan to advocate for solutions to societal conditions that keep women in precarious situations. I want to increase financial resources to domestic violence prevention programs. I would support organized labor to cover more informal or cash heavy industries (hospitality work, domestic work, construction work) where women and LGTBQGN folks are often paid less and face unsafe working conditions. I would put more resources towards increasing access to safe and high quality reproductive care for all women regardless of status. I will support decriminalizing sex workers and support sex workers organizing for more protections. New York City can do more to</p>

	<p>invest in the health, well being, and social and professional development of young girls and teenagers through deeper investments in the community school model and subsequently the community school non-profit partners that provide programming.</p>
<p>In reviewing the NYC Budget, what specific categories do you think should be either cut or increased to help the city's current economic predicament?</p>	<p>Right now we need to put steep investments into healthcare access, mental health, education, and social services. We know that the \$6 billion NYPD budget is more than what we spend on a number of vital services combined - more than healthcare, education, services for the houseless. I believe with a strong majority of new Council members who are committed to a budget that reflects the city's needs we can significantly cut spending on items that do not contribute to overall community safety. See answer to question on funding the NYPD.</p>
<p>What are your recovery priorities for the district related to the COVID-19 pandemic?</p>	<p>COVID-19 recovery will be my top priority for District 37 throughout my campaign. For the last six months I have worked non-stop, even immediately after being unjustly kicked off the ballot, in supporting our community with food distribution twice a week. We are supporting over 2000 families every week with a supply of food and we know we are not reaching everyone. We are also serving as a basic source for information on housing resources, mental health services, and more. District 37 does not have representation at this moment and will not for the rest of 2020. The burden of supporting our district through the compounding crisis of COVID and the economic shutdown is on our community. While we are working hard to continue responding to the crisis, New York City needs a sweeping set of COVID recovery policies that drastically expands access to health, support to workers excluded from public assistance, extends the eviction moratorium for the rest of 2020 and that presents a clear plan for safe education and child care.</p>

	<p>While the recovery effort is not something I will directly have an opportunity to vote on or shape, I will be fighting for many issues that will be urgent during the campaigning season, but may have solutions presented by the time we get to the end of the 2021 election season.</p>
<p>What would you do to reform the Land Use process to promote racial and social equity?</p>	<p>I am in support of a comprehensive zoning plan that accounts for all of the city’s residential, industrial, and ecological needs. Having watched East NY undergo a rezoning and Bushwick develop a community plan that was rejected by the Department of City Planning, my assessment is that piecemeal planning is not a useful strategy to stemming gentrification and displacement. I think a comprehensive plan where all residents directly have input on creating a clear vision of how the city is going to develop will provide stability and security for residents and allow for strong coordination among different city agencies.</p> <p>Additionally, I will continue to push for all publicly owned properties to have 100% of any housing developed on it to be affordable based on the income levels of the district. I will also push for the inclusion of a Racial Impact Study to be included in any rezoning same as the Environmental Impact Study.</p>
<p>What is your vision for the Brooklyn Democratic Party?</p>	<p>I would like to collaborate with NKD on making the issues with the Brooklyn Democratic Party visible to a wider audience. Most people, even those that are very active in following local politics, do not understand why the Brooklyn Democratic Party is relevant to their broader work and how it impacts their civic lives. I think there are opportunities during the campaign to raise the issues within the party through lifting up District Leaders working to reform it.</p>
<p>New Kings Democrats has proposed several <u>rules changes</u> to be considered by the County Committee. Do you support the proposals? If elected, will you advocate for these and other</p>	<p>I support NKD’s mission of making the Brooklyn Democratic Party transparent and inclusive. I have been publicly very supportive of NKD and NKD-endorsed District Leaders.</p>

<p>reforms that democratize power within the County Committee?</p>	
<p>How much money have you raised for this campaign? What are the major sources?</p>	<p>We currently have raised \$120K in matched donations. Our only sources are individual donors with the average donation at \$40 and over half our donations under \$27.</p>
<p>Are you accepting campaign contributions from law enforcement unions?</p>	<p>Never.</p>
<p>What endorsements have you received from publications, electeds, community leaders, or political organizations?</p>	<p>Make the Road Action NYCC Working Families Party Nydia Velasquez Julia Salazar Antonio Reynoso Maritza Davila (and expect 2 others next week)</p>
<p>Of the elected officials in the NYC Council, who do you admire most and why?</p>	<p>I admire the staff of the NYC Council who are often not paid adequately for the incredible amount of hours they spend on the job. I admire the legal counsel that ensures good policies can happen. I admire the custodial staff that keeps City Hall functional. I give respect to anyone who is able to make it to public office that is not a cis white man.</p>
<p>What are some of the best ways you think New York City residents can best participate in civic life?</p>	<p>I believe New York City residents are more engaged in civic life than I have seen in quite some time. To sustain that energy and excitement I believe it is on all of us to be finding or creating as many opportunities for New Yorkers to be part of organized groups, clubs, crews, squads, associations, etc. We need as many people as possible to be part of organized groups that have missions, visions, and clear values. Even having the option for civic life is something we have to commit ourselves to maintaining over the course of our lifetimes. I say that because my father grew up under a dictatorship. The opportunities we have to speak up and speak out, to organize for power, are important and I implore as many</p>

	people as possible to actively support groups they like, and spend time recruiting people to them.
What is one fun fact about you?	I crush all my badminton opponents.

I have reviewed this questionnaire and agree that the responses set forth in this document are accurate:

Candidate Signature: _____ Date: ___ 10.8.20 _____

You must sign this questionnaire! When complete, please email your signed and scanned questionnaire as a PDF to politics@newkingsdemocrats.com