

Thank you for agreeing to complete the South Central Brooklyn United for Progress City Council District 40 candidate questionnaire. Please be sure to familiarize yourself with how our endorsement process works - a candidate must receive $\frac{2}{3}$ of the ranked choice vote in order to win our endorsement. [More details here.](#)

Your answers to these questions will be made available to the public on our website, <http://scbkunitedforprogress.org/>, and will be promoted on our Facebook page and twitter feed.

Answers are due 24 hours prior to your scheduled interview time if you want to be considered for endorsement!

Campaign Information

What is your name?

Rita Joseph

What are your preferred pronouns?

She/Her

What office are you running for?

NYC Council, District 40

Who is the point of contact for your campaign and what is the best way to get in touch with them?

Sam Weinberger, Campaign Manager, sam@ritajoseph.com

What is your campaign address?

Committee to Elect Rita Joseph, 289 21st St, Apt 1R Brooklyn, NY 11215

What is your campaign phone number?

646-753-2193

What is your campaign email?

hello@ritajoseph.com

What is your campaign website?

<https://www.ritajoseph.com>

Is your campaign on social media? If so, what platform(s) and what are the names?

<https://www.facebook.com/RitaJosephNYC>

<https://twitter.com/RitaJosephNYC>

<https://www.instagram.com/ritajosephnyc/>

Campaign Issues

What would you do to improve **health care** as a city council member?

As it stands right now, our healthcare system is not equitable. For instance, an issue I am particularly passionate about is combating maternal morbidity and maternal mortality. As I wrote in the [Brooklyn Reader](#), there's no aspect of life in which systemic racism in healthcare is more agonizing than in regards to maternal care. As I told [THE CITY](#), the disproportionate rates at which Black women and women of color are affected by preventable pregnancy-related complications is alarming and egregious. We must eradicate the systemic racism in healthcare which allows for these tragedies.

We can and we must do better to make our healthcare system more equitable, and a key way to do this is to allocate more funds to NYC Health + Hospitals to ensure that every patient gets the world-class healthcare they deserve.

What do you feel are the biggest challenges facing New Yorkers and those in your district regarding **immigrant rights and access to resources** and what would you do to address them?

As an immigrant, I am committed to elevating and improving the lives of immigrants in my community. I am a strong advocate for allowing New York City residents who are not US citizens to be allowed to vote in municipal elections. I support the New York Immigration Family Unity Project to ensure legal representation of all detained immigrants, regardless of charge or offense. Additionally, I will fight to make sure that all New York City residents, regardless of

immigration status, are guaranteed food, housing, and healthcare during our nation's public health and economic crisis. I also support abolishing ICE. ICE's inhumane treatment of immigrants is unacceptable. Separating families, denying basic healthcare, and excessive deportation and detention is cruel and callous. We must work to protect the vibrant immigrant community in NYC and I am committed to combating these discriminatory institutions that are a barrier to our residents' rightful path to citizenship.

Even before COVID, I've been creating change and collaborating with immigrant groups and individuals through my work with local partners to provide basic needs not being met within the community, such as hosting Thanksgiving dinners, facilitating coat drives, and assisting mutual aid networks with meals for hungry families. During the pandemic, I have simply continued and increased the work I had already been doing for more than two decades. Immigrant communities like mine have been hit especially hard by this pandemic, which is why I've been working locally to help source PPE and run food banks at local community-based organizations, churches, and nonprofits. Specifically, I have worked with PAYO (Pakistani American Youth Organization), Evangelical Crusade Church, Flatbush Mutual Aid, Brooklyn Immigrant Community Support, East Flatbush Community Partnership, Multicultural Bridge, among many other organizations. My community is full of Caribbean, Muslim, and Jewish immigrants that all have specific issues they need addressed. When I speak with my Caribbean sisters, I often hear about maternal mortality and morbidity. With my Jewish and Muslim peers, I hear about the religious persecution that they face. All three of these communities care about affordable housing, ending homelessness, and eradicating food insecurity. I focused on addressing all of these issues if elected to City Council.

In addition to the services I would offer all constituents, I would seek to support the immigrant community through access to legal services as well as language services to assist them in navigating the city's available benefits. I plan to have a multiethnic, multilingual staff that reflects the diversity of both District 40 and NYC as a whole.

What do you feel are the biggest challenges facing New Yorkers and those in your district regarding **civil rights and criminal justice** and what would you do to address them?

As the mother of four Black boys, I go to bed every night praying that my sons don't become the next Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin, or George Floyd. Combating racial injustice was one of my main motivating factors when I decided to run for City Council. I am fully committed to advocating for police reform and transparency.

I have attended countless Black Lives Matter marches and events and have been participating in the fight for racial justice my entire life—my mere existence is resistance against the power structures that have held down communities of color for generations. Among events that I have

organized, Black Lives Matter (Brooklyn) has helped to serve food at my annual community Thanksgiving dinner.

NYC needs to reduce the NYPD's operating budget through meaningful changes, not just tucking funds into other departmental budgets. However, we need to more than just cut the NYPD's budget. We need to then reinvest funding from the NYPD budget into the community and educational organizations aimed at ending the school-to-prison pipeline. I support reducing the NYPD's budget by at least \$1 billion. There are a number of ways this could be done. To begin with, police have no role in New York City public schools. I would advocate for every school resource officer to be replaced by a guidance counselor, psychologist, or other social worker that would be part of the City's Department of Education. I also support a hiring freeze, a reduction in overtime spending, and cutting unnecessary capital programs for the NYPD.

It is abundantly clear that the NYPD has a bloated budget and that its officers have responsibilities that are outside their purview of expertise. For this reason, I support shifting noise complaints, mental health crises, and most other conflict handling to trained social workers without weapons. Along these lines, I also support returning traffic enforcement to the Department of Transit and making sure that only people dealing with the homeless are those trained in social work as well as crisis and mental health counseling. The City recently announced a pilot program with a new mental health team that will respond to mental health crises in two precincts—I fully support spreading this practice citywide.

Besides my position on reducing the NYPD's budget, I also support reforms to the NYPD and the criminal justice system as a whole not directly related to the budget. These include:

- Ending qualified immunity for the NYPD to ensure we get justice when officers commit acts of violence.
- Ending the racially discriminatory practice of broken windows policing, which often targets low-income, communities of color.
- Investing more into decarceration programs that keep non-violent offenders out of prison.
- Abolishing metrics such as arrest quotas that encourage police to "make their stats" by arresting New Yorkers for victimless crimes.
- Not building any new jails, prisons, or detention centers in New York City.
- Banning the use of facial recognition software by law enforcement agencies
- Making covering name and badge number during any civilian interaction a fireable offense.
- Implementing a "duty to intervene" law, to require police to intervene if they see another officer harming or risking a member of the public, with a failure to intervene a fireable offense.

Major reforms are needed for the Civilian Complaint Review Board. As it stands right now, the CCRB is largely toothless. The NYPD has reduced or rejected the CCRB's recommendations for serious discipline in about 71% of the serious misconduct charges that have been brought against officers within the last 20 years. We must take tangible steps to empower the Board so that it may more effectively police the police. To begin with, we must allow the Board to investigate misconduct, even when it does now receive a complaint. Right now, even if evidence

of misconduct becomes publicly available, the CCRB has to formally receive a complaint in order to review alleged misconduct. Additionally, we must make CCRB disciplinary determinations binding. I unequivocally and absolutely support state legislation to make CCRB disciplinary determinations binding. An empowered CCRB is a powerful tool for curtailing abuse by the NYPD.

What do you feel are the biggest challenges facing New Yorkers and those in your district regarding **public schools and education** and what would you do to address them?

The lack of funding for our public schools was one of my motivating factors when I decided to run for office. As a Public School Teacher, I have first-hand experience with the lack of funding for our City's public schools. I have had to buy my students school supplies that should have been provided by the Department of Education. This lack of funding is inexcusable. I support the following steps to improve our City's public schools:

- Increasing community involvement in public education through community events, after school programs, and other community partnerships.
- Encouraging teachers and students alike to better prepare themselves for an increasingly technological world; all classrooms should have access to the latest tech to enhance the learning experience and allow access to learning skills such as coding.
- Ending our over-reliance on standardized testing and allowing teachers to focus on preparing our students better for the world they'll face.
- Attracting some of the best minds in New York to become teachers through increased pay, benefits, and funding that directly impacts the classroom through reduced class sizes, improved buildings, supplies, and technology.
- Investing less in safety officers and more in school counselors, nurses, and teachers.
- Ending the overcrowding of our classrooms and allowing teachers to provide more 1-on-1 attention to students.

In regards to addressing the resource shortfall schools face specifically, I will aggressively petition the state to invest in its students. The Alliance for Quality Education has valiantly advocated for the state to provide adequate funding to the city's schools. By their estimate, the City is owed \$4 billion in education funding-I will fight day and night to make sure that the NYC Board of Education gets every penny of that \$4 billion. I also support decreasing the pay of NYC Council Members from the current level of \$148,500 to the previous level of \$112,500, on the condition that the money saved will be directly allocated to the City's Board of Education. This would result in more than \$1.8 million each year for our students. Lastly, and most importantly, I

support reinvesting funds from the NYPD budget into our public schools. We need to decrease the NYPD's budget by at least \$1 billion dollars so that the City has money available to be reallocated towards directly benefiting our students.

I encourage you to read my Gotham Gazette article on the need to properly fund our schools here:

<https://www.gothamgazette.com/opinion/10034-new-york-city-must-invest-more-in-public-education-schools>

What do you feel are the biggest challenges facing New Yorkers and those in your district regarding **housing** and what would you do to address them?

The homelessness crisis has impacted my district significantly. At PS6 where I teach, my school is a feeder for students who live semi-permanently in shelters. In a typical school year, I work with 300+ students that are homeless. 1 out of 8 District 40 students, many of which are my students, have experienced homelessness in the last five years. The City has thus far failed to ensure homeless New Yorkers have a pathway to permanent housing. The City has attempted to solve the homeless problem with shelters, but this is only a band-aid fix. Our City's homeless population needs housing, not shelters. While the 11 family shelters in District 40 are better than having people live on the streets, they are not long-term solutions. New York City has failed my students. It's time for a change.

In order to eradicate the systemic failure of homelessness in New York City, we need a multi-pronged, dynamic strategy. I support expanding rent vouchers, facilitating more supportive housing opportunities, and building more affordable housing in both high and low-income areas. Most importantly, I support giving a preference for housing to homeless people in new affordable housing, along with any other resources they may need to help them get on their feet. Homelessness affects marginalized communities such as foster children, people with mental health issues, LGBTQ+ folks, and communities of color the hardest. In the 21st century, in the richest city in the world, there is no reason why we should be allowed to be complacent about this issue. As stated previously, housing is a human right and we need to work diligently to eradicate homelessness.

The homeless population of District 40 and New York City as a whole is in desperate need of help. I support providing more affordable housing units, protecting tenants from unfair rent increases, and improving the conditions of NYCHA complexes to provide better pathways for New Yorkers who are vulnerable to or facing homelessness. We also must focus on homelessness prevention. I am in favor of social welfare programs that provide free assistance and counseling to those struggling with mental illness, addiction, and other issues that affect one's ability to maintain housing. My plan to reallocate NYPD funds to education and healthcare

will also work to prevent crime and drug addiction which often lead to homelessness in our communities.

While the greatest policy changes to increase access to affordable housing and move to reduce homelessness will have to come from the state and Federal government, there are concrete proposals that I support which would have a significant impact on this critically important issue.

1. Steven Levin's [bill](#) to increase voucher values to the federally mandated fair market value would result in more rental options in an extremely tight affordable housing market. This bill would go a long way in reducing the homeless population as it would allow families to move out of shelters into affordable housing. If elected to City Council, I pledge to vocally support this bill and be its champion, as well as the champion of homeless folks more broadly.
2. Mark Levine's [bill](#) to double the income levels that are eligible for the Universal Access to Counsel program from 200% of the poverty line to 400% would help to protect more people from unjust evictions and expensive court proceedings. Though the bill does not go as far as I would like (I believe that individuals and families with assets up to 600% of the poverty line should be covered under the right to counsel), there is strong evidence to suggest that expanding the right to counsel does in fact lower eviction rates. At the same time that this bill is passed, we must expand government funding for public defenders to ensure that they can provide the legal defense that every client deserves. Judge Learned Hand once said, "If we are to keep our democracy, there must be one commandment: Thou shalt not ration justice". This quote is as true today as when he first said it in 1951 and I am proud to follow in his footsteps to make sure that all individuals get the legal representation that common sense and a basic understanding of fairness tells us they deserve.
3. Lastly, the city has to invest in Community Land Trusts, which can support permanently affordable housing. Community Land Trusts provide for democratic community control of housing and offer lower rents and minuscule eviction rates. They help to organize tenants and protect against rent increases. The limited number of Community Land Trusts that NYC has have been successful, and we must build on them further.

Lastly, I commit to working with NYCHA residents and community stakeholders to create and implement a resident-led oversight council to help guide NYCHA activities and execution of repairs, capital improvements and structures.

What is your opinion on **the development at 1620 Cortelyou road** and on how the city should handle **development and rezoning** generally?

I feel deeply that I have an obligation to oppose the proposed upzoning of 1620 Cortelyou Rd. The current proposal is an arbitrary rezoning that is on a plot of land that was previously upzoned as part of the larger 2009 Flatbush Rezoning. That rezoning had a

significant amount of community input. Conversely, this proposed rezoning does not. Additionally, this proposal does not provide the affordable housing units that our neighborhoods need. Our neighborhoods in Central Brooklyn are already at risk of being gentrified. I fear that the proposed project being completed would only accelerate the affordability crisis in our neighborhoods. We are already facing a shortage of affordable housing supply throughout Brooklyn. As proposed currently, this project would not help matters. Lastly, and significantly, the proposal will take away the only laundromat in the neighborhood, which services the entire community.

On rezoning broadly, I opposed, most recently, the proposed rezonings in Flushing and Industry City. In Flushing, the plan fell woefully short of adding meaningful levels of affordable housing and failed to incorporate community feedback in any significant manner. In Industry City, we saw yet another developer-driven rezoning that completely ignored the Green Resilient Industrial District (GRID) that the community, UPROSE, and others supported. One of my core beliefs is that, particularly in low-income neighborhoods, the City must empower the community to offer its own proposals for the future of the neighborhood. Right now, communities must raise obscene amounts of money to merely hire the requisite experts to formulate these proposals, let alone to navigate the rest of the ULURP process. I would have the City fund the urban planners, land use professionals, and other experts that communities need to push back against developers and to elevate ground-up proposals. It is absolutely crucial that communities can make their voices heard in a substantive way.

I do support rezoning higher-income neighborhoods. For instance, I think it is appropriate for a neighborhood such as SOHO/NOHO to add affordable housing. These neighborhoods are in the greatest need of integration, and the affordable housing built there would benefit from a more powerful subsidy from any market-rate apartments that are created.

In sum, I think the single most important factor when making decisions regarding land use is listening to the communities that will be most affected by any policy choice, with the important caveat that NIMBYism cannot be allowed to win the day.

On member deference, I think it can be useful but not when it's used to ignore the community. As a starting point, we have to trust that Council Members are the ones who are most in touch with their community—a prime example would be Council Member Menchaca in his opposition to the Industry City rezoning. But I will be skeptical of member deference if it appears that the Council Member has engaged their community in good faith, especially when it is in furtherance of a plan that REBNY and developers are championing, and which fails to meaningfully advance our City's need for affordable housing.

What would you do to improve **transit and street (pedestrian/bicycle/car) safety** for New Yorkers in your district?

According to the City's "[Green Wave](#)" plan for cycling in New York City, District 40 is a priority district to expand the city's network of bike lanes, and I would hope so given that it also has one of the highest rate of cyclist deaths anywhere in the city. Additionally, the City's bike share network offers no ports beyond the northern half of Prospect Park and the service is therefore difficult if not impossible for District 40 residents to access. Being a district resident for more than the last 20 years (as well as growing up here after immigrating from Haiti), it has long been obvious to me that Central/South Brooklyn is car-infested to an unbearable extent for cyclists and pedestrians and thus the city's assessment and coming investment is long overdue. I see the need to expand biking in District 40 not as a problem but an opportunity. It is an opportunity to empower green transportation infrastructure, an opportunity to employ hundreds of good, union jobs, and reclaim our streets from the cars that have for too long controlled them.

In early 2020, Citi Bike announced an [immediate expansion into upper Manhattan and the Bronx funded by a \\$100 million investment from Lyft](#). Much of District 40 is also targeted by this expansion, but development is not yet underway, in spite of the fact that many of the cycling deaths occurred here in Brooklyn. If elected, I will work with the Department of Transportation to overcome [bureaucratic challenges](#), which they claim are the main obstacle to the creation of new bike lanes. To promote bike usage, I will personally host weekend bike rides with school groups and fellow Councilmembers.

The expansion of biking and Citi Bike will begin to address the lack of access to healthy transportation options that majority-minority communities like mine have rarely had access to. That in and of itself will be an injustice righted. Criteria of environmental injustices that are often cited are higher rates of asthma and other conditions/diseases found in Black and Brown communities like mine. With the successful construction of bike lanes and the deployment of Citi Bikes, we will not only get cars off the road and lessen emissions but also offer a healthy form of transportation that doubles as a form of exercise.

What do you feel are the biggest challenges facing New Yorkers and those in your district regarding **the environment, including access to, maintenance, development and preservation of parks and other open spaces** and what would you do to address them?

The climate crisis is THE existential threat facing our world today. The issue impacts every other policy field, ranging from food security, to health, to gun violence, to housing, and more. We need concrete and meaningful action at all levels of government to combat climate change and all of its adverse effects. In New York City, with a population that is knowledgeable about the threat of climate change and progressive, we have the ability to lead the country in local, progressive climate legislation. I want to be part of the coalition that leads the way for the rest of the country to combat this threat, which is the gravest one facing humankind today and moving forward.

In the past, I have fought for the environment in ways both big and small. Individually, through my work at PS 6, I instituted meatless Mondays to cut down on my school's footprint as

well as educate the next generation about the Climate Crisis. More broadly, I have marched with the Sunrise movement to promote their goal of enacting a Green New Deal.

The lack of parkland in District 40 is an issue that has troubled me for quite some time. District 40 is ranked 45th for the number of park & playground acres per 1,000 residents out of NYC's 51 City Council Districts— we can and must do better.

I am a passionate supporter of parks and increased green spaces and believe more/improved parks are needed as part of a larger Green New Deal. The current lack of accessibility to parks and green, open, public space in District 40, and Black and Brown communities as a whole, is totally unacceptable. It is for this reason that I support a city-wide study to determine where it's most feasible to add green space in NYC. The study will take community input from various community stakeholders and will allow elected officials and the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation to make decisions that are as informed as possible. If elected, I will advocate aggressively for more public open green spaces throughout the city, especially in District 40, making sure to engage with local organizations and activists (such as yourself) so that their opinion is taken into account in a meaningful way. I will oppose any and every effort to rezone parkland in our neighborhoods. Quality public parks should not just be accessible for the privileged or wealthy; they belong in all neighborhoods.

The preservation of parks and other open spaces will play a huge role in being District 40's Council Member as we are directly south of Prospect Park, which in my not-so-humble opinion is the best Park in New York City. It is of the utmost importance that it is maintained, and the biggest obstacle to that being done is lack of funding. Public Parks are the lungs of a city and should be budgeted as such. Between Prospect Park and the Parade Grounds adjacent to it, we must preserve Central Brooklyn's open spaces.

What other issues do you consider important and how will you address them?

Constituent services will be a critical aspect of my office and will serve as a direct line to the people to hold me accountable for my actions in office. They will be of the highest priority for

me. When elected, I make a personal guarantee that any constituent request receives a response within 24 hours at the absolute longest. I pledge to have either in-person or virtual office hours at least once a month, on a weekend, where constituents can directly ask me questions and offer their opinions on matters affecting NYC and the district. I plan on giving constituent services staff a major platform for helping to develop policy. Because these staffers will know what issues are impacting the community the most, they are uniquely positioned to help shape policy. Additionally, my staff will seek out constituents, rather than the other way around—I want my staff and I to be as accessible as possible. One elected official that has inspired me in this regard has been Gale Brewer. She is seemingly at every public event in Manhattan and I plan to do the same thing for District 40.

For fun (answers to these questions are not required)

If your district had a musical anthem, what would it be and why?

I will Survive, Gloria Gaynor. Our district has faced a significant amount of adversity in the last year, but I am confident that we will not only survive, but *thrive*, as we overcome COVID.

What is your favorite restaurant in your district?

Some of my favorite restaurants in the district are Golden Krust, Natural Blend, Fisherman's Cove, Venus Restaurant, Risbobk, Brooklyn Perk, and Zen. I can't just pick one!