

# Our Revolution Baltimore City/County

## *Baltimore City Endorsement Questionnaire*

**Candidate Name: Dan Sparaco**

**Office and District Running For: Baltimore City Council President (Citywide)**

### **1. What is your vision and plan for public safety and reform of the police and criminal justice system?**

The conversation about public safety has focused too much about “plans” to fix an unacceptable status quo. Instead, we need to start with values, and a moral framework we can use to hold the system and our leaders accountable.

Here’s what I believe about those who live in our most violent neighborhoods – those who are over-policed, under-protected, and overwhelmingly Black. First, residents of these neighborhoods respect the law. Second, they hate the violence. Third, they want to be safe, and they want their children to be safe. These three things are my starting point, and I take issue with the many people ready to assume the worst about those who live in high-violence neighborhoods (that they are lawless, that they are immoral, that they don’t care about their children, that they don’t know the difference between right and wrong – ideas one can hear every day on conservative talk radio).

The problem is that too many people simply do not trust the police – and for good reason. The great majority of people in Baltimore believe law should be obeyed, and are more than willing to report crime, but many do not feel safe around our police. The Gun Trace Task Force scandal, and other instances of police misconduct, leads people to think twice about seeking help from the police, and unfortunately leads to people who are victims of violence taking matters into their own hands and retaliating.

Baltimore’s police department – and in fact, our entire criminal justice system – is facing a crisis of legitimacy because of these factors. There’s a mutual suspicion at work that creates mutual misapprehension: the police think community silence is an endorsement of violence and the encouragement of a “stop snitchin’” culture.

Meanwhile the community thinks that most policing and drug enforcement is an organized conspiracy to jail their sons.

Baltimore today with so many homicides – and so many unsolved homicides and non-fatal shootings – is experiencing the consequences of this crisis.

The number one thing we must do to fix this is to respect the neighborhoods that suffer the violence the most – earn their consent to the right kind of policing, protect them when they come forward to identify wrongdoers, and most of all, stop doing things that destroy the social fabric of these communities.

That last point is key, because community norms and values are far important in controlling crime than the threat of formal legal sanction. There are many neighborhoods in Baltimore that never see a police car and have no extensive police presence – and nobody gets shot. That isn't primarily because people are afraid of going to jail, but because it is well understood by the community that shooting someone is wrong.

The problem in Baltimore today is that too many people in our police department, in our criminal justice system, and in City Hall assume that the norms that prevent shootings in Roland Park are not shared by the residents of Harlem Park – and this is a racist and wrong. The real problem is that the criminal justice system itself is criminogenic and undermines community norms and informal social control. Over-policed neighborhoods have been destabilized by high incarceration rates and the many collateral consequences of incarceration – for families, for returning citizens, for the entire community. We do not have “high crime” neighborhoods as much as we have neighborhoods that are highly enmeshed in the criminal justice system, and cannot flourish and manage themselves as a result.

Reversing course, I believe, will require a strategy called Focused Deterrence. This approach assumes that homicides and shootings are by far the most destabilizing events for a community, and must be prevented, but also that a very, very small group of people are responsible for these events. We already know who they are, and can approach them with a carrot-and-stick strategy that offers traditional sanctions on the one hand (prison), and a way out on the other (a GED, job training, therapy and the rebuilding of family and community bonds). Many cities have seen drastic drops in homicides using this strategy.

Practically, focused deterrence also means ending cash bail. It means believing in rehabilitation, and not viewing those convicted of violent crimes as irretrievable cases of psychopathy. It means much shorter prison sentences and much different kinds of sanctions for parole violations – because research has clearly shown that the

sanction needed to correct wrongdoing is *far less* than that usually meted out by our draconian system.

It also means ending the criminalization of Black youth in this city. Incarceration should be extremely rare for people under 18, and when it happens, it should happen as close as possible to that child's family and support network – not in far-off counties as it does today.

I intend to champion these ideas as Council President, and in my legislative role I will advocate for (1) local control of our police department, (2) local control of Parole and Probation, (3) the return of the local control the city once had over the Department of Social Services. The only way we can carry out the reversal of decades of terrible policy is with a unified effort across these sectors that makes sure there are shared values and a shared strategy across the crime control agency, the agency that should be responsible for managing successful reentry, and the agency that needs to support families in the first place, and that has to lead on child support policies that will allow our men to return to stable employment, not render them permanent economic refugees.

I will also champion the policies called for in the Job Opportunities Task Force report, "The Criminalization of Poverty: How to Break the Cycle Through Policy Reform in Maryland."

## **2. What can you do, within the powers of the office you are running for, to improve education for all Baltimoreans and provide educational equity?**

The Kirwan Commission was a multi-year effort to analyze school funding in Maryland, facilitated in no small part by the Maryland General Assembly. Baltimore City needs a similar effort, carried out over the next two years, to analyze all of its spending and determine how we as a city will meet our obligations under Kirwan.

As Council President, that's right in my wheelhouse, and I intend to create a Commission charged with demanding that hard choices be made. In particular, we need to slowly move a large part of the \$550 million spent on police into our school system.

There is also the question of accountability, a structural problem that I would like to address as Council President. Currently no elected official has any accountability for our school system. In 1997, mayoral accountability was removed altogether, and the school system was removed from the mayor's cabinet and made a quasi-independent entity. Yes, the mayor now appoints all members of the school board, but this is a ceremonial act that does not come with meaningful oversight or responsibility.

Practically, this means our city's limited resources are not used most effectively. The school system and city government have duplicative bureaucracy, and neither perform particularly well when considering human resource, finance, or other administrative functions.

Much more important, it means resources are not aligned. City schools has a capital program to build new schools, and city government has an entirely separate capital program to build entirely separate recreation centers. One set of expensive infrastructure will support children until 3 p.m. on school days, and another set of expensive infrastructure will support them after 3 p.m.

This set-up makes achieving true community schools – open early and late, accessible to children and parents, acting as resource hubs for our neighborhoods and recreation opportunities for our kids – almost impossible except on an ad hoc, piecemeal basis.

To be clear, in the short term, it is hard to imagine re-establishing City Hall accountability for our schools because City Hall's performance has been so poor. But we need to develop a long-term vision to create a sustainable, successful school system where all of our investments are strategically aligned.

### **3. How will you address blight and revitalize communities while avoiding gentrification?**

I live in one of the few neighborhoods that are experiencing what can technically called gentrification – which to me means the rapid increase in median income and median home value in a neighborhood (not just the opening of a hip coffee shop on the corner, or the occasional spotting of a white person in Black neighborhood).

Greenmount West, together with North Patterson Park, were the original "Vacants to Value" neighborhoods. V2V focused on neighborhoods near "anchors" or "areas of strength," and involved city code enforcement intervention as a way to commence a long, slow process of transferring ownership of vacant properties to private developers, to return those properties to the market.

The problem with this approach is that it took too long, was entirely top-down picking neighborhood "winners" and "losers," and did not help residents of the chosen neighborhoods buy in before home values became out of reach for them. Moreover, the focus on these neighborhoods was an implicit statement that huge swaths of the city will be permanently left behind. This is the wrong approach, and we can't make these mistakes again.

Fundamentally, the solution to our problem with blight and vacancy is a land bank. We need to take rapid action to swallow up vacant, blighted land and homes into a pool, rapidly clean title to that land, and then invest in multiple strategies to build affordable and market-rate housing across the city.

Using a land bank, we can also more easily establish land trusts at scale.

In addition, we need to end the constant churn of properties in the tax sale process, which encourages real estate speculation at the expense of ending blight. And we need to accelerate the land disposition process and allow those who want to invest in housing to do so faster than they can now, mired in bureaucracy and outdated approval processes. Comprehensive legislative action can be taken here.

#### **4. How will you ensure that communities in the Black Butterfly receive equitable investment?**

I believe two things are essential here.

First, we need to pursue policies that rebuild our city's Black middle class. The Black Butterfly desperately needs income diversity, far more than racial diversity. The long-term answers here are provided in #1, #2, and #3 above. There are too many people who grew up in the Black Butterfly but cannot imagine raising their own children there because they do not believe their children will be safe and well-educated. There are thousands of people living in West Baltimore County, Anne Arundel and Howard County who would consider returning to the city they grew up in if we could solve our long-term challenges. I personally know so many people for whom this is true. We could be Atlanta on the Northeast Corridor with an aggressive, inclusive approach, and a sense of urgency.

As Council President, the immediate steps that can be taken relate to the city's budget and tax priorities. I never would have voted for the Port Covington TIF as structured, because none of the affordable housing will be built on site in what will eventually be a high-opportunity neighborhood. Any future TIF – such as for the Perkins Homes redevelopment – has to come with an affordable housing requirement with real teeth.

Second, we also need a real capital planning vision. The Black Butterfly exists in large measure because of "urban renewal" development choices that walled-off and isolated Black neighborhoods by design. In the case of the west side, not only were thousands of homes destroyed to build the Highway to Nowhere, many other neighborhoods were permanently destabilized as an all-white City Council toyed with the variety of alignment options for the highway, slating a variety of neighborhoods for destruction for a highway that never came.

I am excited about reforming the capital planning and contracting process and driving this key goal – to undo over the next ten years the consequences of these urban renewal investments. Dismantling the elevated section of I-83 to reconnect the Monument Street corridor, Oldtown, and Johnston Square with downtown. Reconfiguring MLK so it is no longer a hard barrier between downtown and the west side. Re-establishing the nature urban street grid where it has been interrupted to create barriers between white and Black neighborhoods, such as around State Center. Building out the infrastructure to support the new Black Arts District along Pennsylvania Avenue.

**5. How would you improve transit, transportation, and the ability for people to get around in the city? Would you support the creation of a Regional Transit Authority to provide transit independence from the state?**

When I was Assistant Deputy Mayor for Operations I was one of the most vocal advocates for the Red Line in City Hall, routinely debating other members of the mayor's senior staff who were not enthusiastic about the project (because of its construction impacts on Boston Street, the complaints from Harbor East, etc.).

In the late 1960s both D.C. and Baltimore unveiled comprehensive transit plans. D.C. built theirs, while Baltimore built only a fraction of ours. We pay the price for his failure of vision every day – and our poorest residents pay the highest price.

D.C. built their system, like almost all other cities, with a regional authority. One of the worst things to happen for Baltimore's transit system was for it to become a creature of state government. It often feels like our buses and light rail system have no real champion. (When I moved here over a decade ago, I was stunned by how stunned my lawyer co-workers were that I took the bus. I regularly bike and take the bus to work today.)

The only real answer for Baltimore's transit system is a regional authority, designed to build an updated version of a comprehensive transit plan.

In the short term, the focus should be on bus signal priority, bus and bike lane enforcement, and more investment in bike and pedestrian-friendly infrastructure. I also think we should build the 35-mile Greenway Trail Network to encourage people to bike.

**6. How will you address the environment, climate justice, and the climate crisis locally, including not only reducing/eliminating greenhouse gas emissions within the city, but also protecting the people and infrastructure from the consequences of the climate crisis? Will you declare a state of climate emergency?**

It's stunning to me that Fells Point routinely floods when it rains at high tide and this seems not to be considered a crisis. A review of the Planning Department's maps forecasting the impact of sea-level rise makes the climate crisis very clear, and very real. Yes, I would declare a climate emergency.

One of the key things we can do to manage the effects of the climate crisis is be good stewards of our water system. For all of the controversy over wrong water bills and sewage overflows, our water system is a majestic feat of engineering that will deliver water to our city long after the climate crisis has rendered water a precious commodity in other parts of the country and the world. We shouldn't lose sight of that, and we should do what we can to protect this system. In twelve years, we will be glad we did.

**7. How will you improve public health within the city? Please address racial and economic health disparities and social determinants of health. Some things to consider:**

**a. The high asthma rate.**

The asthma hospitalization rate in Baltimore City was 2.3 times higher than the average rate for Maryland. This is the result of interrelated problems of poverty and poor housing conditions, which have a major impact on asthma, of course, those two challenges are core to every policy I intend to pursue, but there are two areas we can focus on to improve air quality.

First, four out of the five Baltimore zip codes with the highest 2011 asthma hospitalization rates included smaller areas with very high exposure to toxic air pollution, coming primarily from roadway vehicles. The answer here is better transit.

Second, in two South Baltimore zip codes, there was a sharp drop in asthma hospitalization rates after 2009, which correlates to steep pollution reductions at two nearby coal-fired power plants. This shows the importance of modernization and regulation of pollution emitters. To that end, the BRESCO incinerator has to be upgraded to best-in-class pollution controls.

**b. Food insecurity and food deserts;**

We need to find creative and aggressive solutions to this problem, because we have been waiting in vain for big-box retailers and grocers to move into food deserts that cannot economically support them. I would fund free car share rides to residents

of food deserts to and from full-service grocery stores, to reduce the barriers to quality food.

**c. Disparities in life expectancy;**

Our city's problem on this score is structural racism and regional isolation. There needs to be a significant re-orientation of our policies towards harm-reduction and reparations, and an acknowledgement from our leaders that this disparity is not "natural" but the result of decades of specific policy intended to have or with the effect of having this result. Baltimore needs leadership that speaks plainly on this matter and builds into the core values of governing; I will.

**d. The effects of trauma and violence.**

In addition to my views on criminal justice articulated above, I have long studied and believed in the principles of restorative justice. Two decades ago as a law student and co-editor of UPenn's Journal of Law and Social Change my colleagues and I hosted a two-day conference on criminal justice, and featured a panel on that topic with leading experts at the time. Again, our leaders have to believe in rehabilitation, restoration, and healing, for every offender. The knee-jerk choice for punitive measures for school children, minor crimes, and even major acts of violence needs to be tempered with consideration of a more basic question – what response will restore community norms, heal all sides, and bolster community bonds?

I think the ROCA program is on the right track providing Cognitive Behavior Therapy into their efforts with those most at-risk of violence, and that approach needs to be funded at scale.

**e. Lead in water and housing.**

Lead paint poisoning is a major public health crisis that still does not get the attention it deserves – surely a function of whom it affects the most in our city, Black children. Remediating the problem will take leadership that champions the issue not just locally, but nationally. It was the national investment in housing segregation decades ago that has allowed this problem to fester in neighborhoods to this day, and it will take a national investment to fix it.

We also need to seek creative ways to hold accountable the industries that caused this problem, long after lead was known to be poisonous. That again will require leadership to push for legislative action at the state and national level.



Locally, we need to hold landlords accountable for lead remediation with a carrots and sticks approach. Ultimately, we need to increase the stock of quality and affordable housing in the city so families are not forced to live in unsafe homes.

Baltimore has avoided the water crises faced by Flint and Newark, NJ by properly treating its water. Underground lead pipes are generally safe provided they are undisturbed; in both of those cities, improper water treatment allowed chemical-filled water to flow through the pipes, corrode those pipes, and unleash the latent lead. Of course we must closely monitor our water quality. But here again, we need a national investment in older cities to refresh our infrastructure on a faster timetable than our own city's resources can allow.

**8. How will you improve economic opportunities for all residents of Baltimore? What programs would you create or reform to improve access to well paying jobs?**

The most important thing I can do as City Council President to improve access to well paying jobs is lead the charge to abolish the city's Board of Estimates, to improve and accelerate the city's contracting and hiring processes. Our city spends millions of dollars a year on projects and services, but the contracting process does not move quickly enough to put money on the ground – and therefore in workers' pockets – and does not do enough to build the capacity of local contractors and the local workforce. And the hiring process, as well as ongoing training of our workforce, are slow and outmoded.

I would seek to champion small manufacturers such as those getting started at Open Works in my neighborhood, who can provide good-paying jobs but are often not supported by government, and whose workforce is not supported by more traditional training and certification regulations.

The short-term answers to improve economic opportunities all go back to the bread-and-butter of getting things done in City Hall. No one trusts our government to solve problems, reduce homicide, or address systemic disparities. Economically, this means job creators will look elsewhere when considering an expansion. My reform agenda is meant to restore faith and accountability in City Hall and, to me, is the critical path to a growing economy for the city.

## **9. What reforms to the structure and functioning of city government would you implement?**

I propose fundamental reform of city government, and the Office of Council President is the place to make that happen.

The Council President is chair of the city's Board of Estimates – which is not only the heart of power in our system, but the heart of corruption, because that's where mayors can award contracts to their own campaign donors. We should abolish it.

The Council President is next-in-line to become mayor, creating a line of inheritance that squashes new leadership. *Three* of our past *four* mayors have inherited the mayor's office without an election (and two of them didn't even want the job, including the current one). We should abolish this line of succession.

The Council President has a staff of thirty people and controls all the resources on the City Council. It's a mayor-like figure, but without any mayor-like responsibility, and it leaves little left for the hard problem-solving we need to realign our budget priorities, investigate policy solutions, and drive results. There's not enough professional, nonpartisan support for bills and committees, and *no* nonpartisan fiscal oversight nor any independent ethics oversight.

We should no longer have a job called "President" and allow the City Council to elect their own leader, someone accountable to the body, not just to their own selfish political interests.

Under my plan, we will have 15 equal members, with no one all-powerful. In addition to the 14 elected from the districts, there will be one "at-large" representative (me). There's nothing strange about this. Many city councils across the country have at-large members, because it is important that someone take on a city-wide view. Philadelphia, D.C., Montgomery Council are all examples. (In fact, we should consider having fewer districts and more at-large members.)

We can then use the resources controlled by the Council President now to create nonpartisan, professional support for good government – a Department of Legislative Services, real audits performed by an Office of Government Accountability, and an Ethics Commission truly independent of the politicians they oversee.

The office of City Council President has the power to fix City Hall, provided that the person in the seat is willing to give up power to make a better system. I am.

**10. How will you improve the quality of life for city residents? Some things to consider:**

**a. Community art.**

My mother and sister are both artists, and art has always been a part of my life.

I would work to support the new Black Arts District, and in fact I would re-establish the connection between Pennsylvania Avenue and the rest of downtown, incentivizing arts investment and artists dwellings up and down Pennsylvania and up and down the Howard Street corridor, which has been dormant for long enough.

My neighborhood is full of community art and I would increase funding for the kind of mural across from my own home across the city.

**b. Community centers and recreation;**

As discussed above, I would work to align the investment in rec centers with the investment in new and renovated schools.

I would fight to fund and build the Greenway Trail Network.

I also think we need to restore our parks place as one of our greatest assets. One reason I would like to reform the capital planning process is to stop our park system from getting the short end of the stick.

**c. Illegal dumping; d. Beautification of streets and neighborhoods;**

Trash on the streets has multiples sources – although I do think that the municipal can issued to every household has had a positive impact.

First, many multifamily dwellings, large and small, do not provide proper trash services to their tenants, and larger dwellings do not get municipal cans. There needs to be much greater oversight of landlords, because tenants with no choice will dump household trash in a bag wherever they can. So much of the trash that can be found in high-rental neighborhoods is a function of this problem. In general households with a big green can use it; those who don't have one, don't, and that's the trash that ends up in alleys and vacant lots.

Second, large piles of household trash are the result of evictions – legal and illegal. There is a large gap between the number of eviction actions filed in the city and the relatively small number of legal evictions (carried out by the sheriff's office). Many landlords are taking matters into their own hands, and dumping entire households in a vacant lot. I've seen this many times in my own neighborhood, which has been in transition. The city can take much more action here to prevent this, monitoring the eviction docket, warning landlords against illegal dumping, offering bulk trash options to relocating tenants who need it.

Third, renovation and construction waste dumped by small contractors working on low-margin renovations is another huge source of trash. Rather than take it to the dump, it gets dumped near the worksite. We need to find a creative solution to this problem. Yes, we have to fine contractors when we can, but we should also determine if there is a way to incentivize them to handle their waste better – tipping fees, bulk trash options, etc.

All three of the above are primarily a Code Enforcement issue. One way to help address the issue is to reform the hand-off between the two different agencies tasked with the same issue: Solid Waste deals with the trash, Housing deals with the fine and the enforcement. It is not a smooth process, as I have witnessed.

I know many people love the idea of corner cans. They are useful in business districts with heavy foot traffic, and are a convenience for transit riders in particular, at bus stops. But they are not a solution to the city's very serious trash problem because the volume of trash they could collect is very small, and the source of that trash is relatively insignificant compared to the issues above.

Composting will be essential in the future, and we need to fund this at scale and raise awareness of this as a better way to handle organic waste.

#### **e. Improving infrastructure;**

Please see #4 and #5 above. The key to making progress on our infrastructure is reforming capital planning and project delivery – which requires City Charter reform I intend to champion as Council President. Our infrastructure investments have to undo urban renewal from decades ago, and drive equitable investment across the city. Our investments must also be paired with new school construction to create a multiplier effect.

#### **f. Trash pickup and recycling.**

I would take a stand against adding more trash days to routine services. The biggest bump in recycling came with the implementation of 1+1 – one trash day, one recycling day. I know many people believe another trash day will make the city cleaner, but “more” isn’t a thoughtful solution, and does not deal with consumption.

One challenge has been that since 1+1 came about, recycling rates have largely flatlined. This has to be improved, with more recycling bins available for households, and better information about what can and cannot be recycled. You can look in the trash can at any coffee shop or in your own neighborhood and see how many people are unsure what can and cannot be recycled.

**11. How will you address the needs of immigrants, both documented and undocumented? Will you ensure the safety of our undocumented neighbors?**

I will continue to support Baltimore as a sanctuary city, and noncooperation between any city agency, the police department, or the school system with ICE (which I think should be abolished).

Immigrants, documented or not, are key to Baltimore’s future and population growth, and I will actively support their inclusion into the fabric of our city.

**12. How will you address the need for equitable and affordable housing?**

I will advocate for new, aggressive leadership at Baltimore Housing and at HABC. I will also push for a fundamental reassessment of our development apparatus, starting with the Baltimore Development Corporation.

The city’s Affordable Housing Trust Fund shows what happens when leadership is not urgently pursuing affordable housing. Even though money exists, not a single unit of affordable housing has been built. Current leadership at the city will host meetings forever and never spent a nickel.

We need to allow fast-track approvals of development proposals that have a substantial affordable component, and create zoning exemptions for high-density mix-income housing to incentivize investment.

**13. How will you balance providing services, including water, to all citizens while planning and paying for infrastructure upgrades/repair and replacement?**

This is a critical question that, frankly, has not gotten enough consideration in debates about water affordability. There is an inherent tension between infrastructure investment – particularly under the EPA consent decree to improve environmental compliance – and affordability. The recent efforts to make water bills more affordable are important for low-income households, but they also reduce the utility's revenue, and thus it's bonding capacity, and as a result, there's a risk that the timeline of major infrastructure projects is extended. Affordability advocates and environmental advocates seem to be working at cross-purposes here – or just leaving up to city bureaucrats to sort out the contradiction, a strategy destined to fail.

We need to keep in mind that, many decades ago, our water and sewer system was designed to do what we now no longer want to see happen – overflow into the waterways and ultimately into the harbor and the Chesapeake. We all need to work together to reverse this, while protecting the system's viability, and the city's control over that system.

With a new Democratic president on the horizon, the time has come to advocate for outside help to resolve this tension, and seek the funds needed to improve infrastructure in our city and others.

#### **14. Is there anything else you'd like us to know?**

Here are some more facts about me. I am 44 years old and own a row home in Greenmount West. I'm recording secretary for my neighborhood association. I'm a native of Long Island, New York, and have lived in Baltimore for over a decade. I'm divorced. I studied philosophy at Boston College, and got my law degree from the University of Pennsylvania. Here's a quick summary of my work background:

Human Rights Fellow, Chiapas, Mexico (Nov 2001 – Jul 2002)

Staff Attorney, Eviction Prevention, The Legal Aid Society, Brooklyn NY (Oct 2002 – Feb 2006)

Associate, Kornstein Veisz Wexler & Pollard, LLP (Mar 2006 – Sep 2010)

Assistant Solicitor — Baltimore City Law Department (Mar 2010 – Mar 2013)

Assistant Deputy Mayor for Operations – Office of the Mayor (Apr 2013 – Oct 2015)

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