

Our Revolution Baltimore City/County

Baltimore City Endorsement Questionnaire

Candidate Name: **Paris Bienert**

Office and District Running For: Baltimore City Council, First District

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

I have laid out policy positions (also on my website at parisbienert.com/plan) that tackle public safety challenges through a public health lens. I firmly believe that we will get to safer communities in Baltimore by not only looking at police reform but going beyond to address root causes with evidence-based practices. My policies informed by those practices include:

- **Hospital-based violence intervention programs.** We should be taking better advantage of our local world-class hospital systems by modeling the Capital Violence Intervention Program (CAP-VIP) in Prince George's County, which is a hospital-based program with significant success that provides trauma-informed care and psychological services to individuals who have experienced violence. As Councilwoman, I will bring together stakeholders from law enforcement and Baltimore's hospitals to study CAP-VIP and develop a plan to implement a similar program in Baltimore City.
- **Expanding the Crisis Response Team.** Oftentimes people will call 911 to report an individual who is experiencing a behavioral health crisis, such as a psychotic episode or a drug overdose. The Baltimore Police Department has piloted a crisis response team where officers are paired with social workers when responding to these calls. This was implemented in direct response to a United States Department of Justice finding that officers were not properly trained in de-escalating situations, and thus responded improperly to individuals experiencing a behavioral health crisis. As Councilwoman, I will work with BPD, the Mayor, and City Council colleagues to expand this pilot program into a permanent Crisis Intervention Teams (CIT) operating at scale for the City.
- **Hiring more women and bi-lingual officers to the sworn police force.** A diverse Baltimore Police Department is better equipped to keep us safe.

Currently, only 16% of BPD officers are women. Women experience public safety much differently than men, and therefore enforce laws and respond to emergencies differently. As Councilwoman, I will advocate for BPD to develop and publish a plan to reach gender parity in the sworn police force and hire more multilingual officers to patrol communities with large international or immigrant populations, including the First District.

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?*

Because our state government controls and appropriates education funding and an independent school board runs and manages the school system, the City Council's control over public education is limited to an advocacy role. I will continue to be a local partner to Baltimore's District 46 state legislators, supporting their efforts to bring school construction dollars to Baltimore City.

On the Council, I will seek to make a substantive difference in youth support by calling for increased funding for recreation centers, an investment in PAL programming, and programs like Youth Works that put our youth on the path to economic stability and help offset disparities in educational equity.

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

There is no simple answer to balancing the growth and development that is often critical to revitalization while avoiding the harm and displacement that come with gentrification. It is no secret that Baltimore has not done this well, as exemplified by our 5th-highest ranking on the gentrification study released by the National Community Reinvestment Coalition last year.

That said, I believe that community development or redevelopment does not necessarily need to result in displacement if we make thoughtful efforts to include residents in lower-income communities as partners in change rather than see them as obstacles to it. I can commit to vigilantly making sure that there are always efforts to involve in the community when any development in my district is being proposed.

As Councilwoman, I will advocate for and sponsor strategies from expanding homestead provisions that exempt long-term homeowners when property taxes increase to working with developers and investors to create community benefits agreements. The most important part of any solution is creating and maintaining a process of true transparency and trust, something that has been wholly absent in many large-scale revitalization programs in Baltimore's history.

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

Much of the First District is a very attractive portion of the city for developers, with a large and vibrant commercial and tourism sector; it is also in the heart of the White 'L'. But not all of it; the stark difference in investment between the eastern side of the District (Graceland Park and O'Donnell Heights as examples) and its western side (represented by Fells Point and Canton) mirror to some degree the disparities that exist in the rest of the city.

Much of the reason for this is the perception of risk, investment return, and safety and familiarity of investors and developers. There are certainly steps I will be able to take on the City Council to help alleviate some of those concerns. Steps include reviewing development incentives and their impact on investment equity, partnering with local and national groups who are focused on empowering underserved communities with smart and aware investment strategies, and partnering with lower-income community leaders and residents who support development.

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?*

Maryland state-level politicians have repeatedly shown a lack of interest and commitment to solving the critical transportation gaps in the Baltimore region, and so I absolutely support the creation of a Regional Transportation Authority that has the power to address these issues.

A significant focus of my policy platform is the expansion of access to public transportation so residents can access good-paying jobs, which is a primary factor in public health, equitable access, and development. Research shows that transportation is one of the top barriers to employment and economic mobility. Furthermore, access to school, healthcare, employment, and other amenities that are needed to live a healthy and complete life require a functional and reliable transportation system. Baltimore lags behind its peer cities on the east coast in terms of providing good quality transportation. As Councilwoman, I will:

- **Support complete streets, transit streets, and active transportation infrastructure.** Southeast Baltimore needs safe, healthy, pedestrian-friendly streets where public transportation, walking, biking, or using a personal mobility device are all convenient options. I will partner with Baltimore City Department of Transportation and the Maryland Transit Administration to implement Baltimore's Complete Streets legislation and build crucial projects like the Baltimore Greenway Trail Network.

- **Champion a Bayview MARC station.** I will partner with state and federal agencies to secure funding for a MARC station at Bayview Hospital. This would create the regional transportation hub that Southeast Baltimore badly needs, and open up access to jobs and destinations throughout Maryland via MARC service.
- **Create a temporary Task Force on Women's Transportation Issues.** I will bring a much-needed woman's perspective to public transportation policymaking in a city where women make up 58% of ridership. Not enough attention is paid to barriers that prevent women from accessing transportation – especially safety. Sexual harassment and violence against women and girls while using public transit frequently goes unaddressed by policymakers. I will work with the Council's Transportation Committee, and the Maryland Transit Administration, to make sure that women's perspectives and needs are always at the forefront during the policymaking process.

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?

As a trained social worker, my work and education have provided me significant insight as to the very real human and community costs of our current state of environmental and climate crisis. In addressing these challenges with local impacts, including the harbor and our waterways, air pollution, flooding, and other impacts from rising sea levels, there is no clear or easy solution, and blanket prohibitions or reactive policies are self-defeating and generally fail to address the complexity of the needs of our communities. I support working with properly credentialed scientists, academics, and environmental advocates in not only in declaring a state of climate emergency. I will also commit to working with those groups so that we can learn more about the impacts, particularly on our lower-income communities, and to seek mediation and contingencies, as well as voting against projects where those considerations are not adequately addressed.

As Councilwoman, I will also advocate for bolder action at the State level, including more significant investment in solar power and hydropower, reducing state government building energy use by 25% versus the 10% in the Hogan plan, and providing consumer and homeowner incentives for green energy adoption and overall reduced energy use, in addition to incentives for builders to build green and with reduced parking requirements. This effort will be a significant driver for environmentally-oriented economic development, as well as the related jobs and industries that come with it.

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;**
- b. Food insecurity and food deserts;**
- c. Disparities in life expectancy;**
- d. The effects of trauma and violence.**
- e. Lead in water and housing.**

I have a fierce commitment to all aspects of public health, especially in addressing issues with impacts as significant and far-reaching as air pollution and its impacts on asthma rates, food insecurity, lead in our paint and our water. While mediation for these issues may be long-term, complicated, and expensive, there is nothing to be gained by continuing to ignore how big these issues are for our City. I will fully support council action to collaborate with academic partners to examine these issues, understand the scope of the problem, and work toward mediation. I will be an ally to advocacy organizations that focus on these issues.

As an example of comprehensive public health planning, I have long advocated for plans to address the opioid crisis in our City. These plans include my commitment to:

- **Opening public health access sites in Baltimore City.** Evidence compiled from around the world demonstrates that safe consumption sites (also known as safe injection facilities) are a proven solution to reducing illicit drug use and the crimes associated with it. As Councilwoman, I will work with community groups, public health professionals, advocates, and law enforcement and seek the support of the State's Attorney's Office, the Maryland Attorney General, and the Baltimore Police Department to develop a public health access site pilot for Baltimore City. This site will combine a safe consumption site with access to treatment and other interventions similar to those offered by Baltimore's stabilization center.
- **Creating a Temporary Medication Assisted Treatment (MAT) task force.** Medication Assisted Treatment (MAT) for opioid addiction – such as methadone and suboxone – is an evidence-based practice that has been medically proven to help people control their opioid addiction and cut mortality rates by more than half. I commit to the creation of a temporary MAT task force charged with proposing actions that can be taken to destigmatize medication assisted treatment and foster positive relationships between facilities and their host communities.
- **Increasing the substance use disorder provider workforce.** We are in the midst of an acute workforce crisis among substance use disorder providers, largely because our society has not yet started treating substance use disorders like we treat other mental health disorders. As Councilwoman, I will continue my work to grow the provider workforce by working with state and local

partners to change regulations around Medicaid billing, leading the way to eliminate the disparity between the recognition of and reimbursement for addiction treatment and mental health treatment.

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?

I believe that a combination of equitable development and an improved transportation infrastructure are key factors in improved economic opportunity. As I stated above, transportation is one of the top barriers to employment economic mobility and my support for complete streets, transit streets, and an active transportation infrastructure plus a new Bayview MARC station are at the top of my list to work on. As for equitable development, my priorities include reviewing development incentives and their impact on invest equity, partnering with local and national groups who are focused on empowering underserved communities with smart and aware investment strategies and partnering with lower-income community leaders and residents who support development.

I also believe that we need specific and sustained efforts to continue to connect residents to good paying jobs and lift more Baltimoreans out of poverty. I support continuing efforts to raise wages and improve benefits for all workers, whether via collective bargaining or legislative action. I know that without focused awareness and intentionality, women and people of color will continue to face an unjust wage gap, which perpetuates inequality. As Councilwoman, I will:

- **Ban salary history inquiries by employers.** Women in Baltimore make on average only 80% of the man's dollar, and women make up the majority of minimum wage workers. While there are many contributing factors to the gender wage gap that have deep historical roots in sexism and oppression, there is a simple legislative step we can take to decrease the gap: banning employers from asking for an employee's salary or wage history. This practice perpetuates the gender wage gap and helps to explain why women get caught in the cycle of wage discrimination because it can prevent women from ever earning equal pay for equal work. When elected, this will be the first piece of legislation I introduce.
- **Introduce paid family leave for municipal employees.** Legislation to provide 18 weeks of paid family leave for municipal employees – the same amount provided to employees of state government – is another effort I will take up on the Council. Paid leave is key to providing infants with consistent care from parents during the crucial early weeks of life, and also prevents parents who leave work to care for children from suffering adverse career consequences like losing income and opportunities for advancement.

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

We see time and time again how our strong-Mayor system is so problematic. I believe the most pressing reform needed in our government structure is reducing the power of the Mayor, and there are several avenues to do that. First, I believe Baltimore should follow the model of other comparable cities and create a City Manager role to take on the administration of basic city services. Secondly, I support efforts to reduce the Mayor's effective control of three out of five votes on the Board of Estimates. Whether this means adding positions to the Board, abolishing the Board altogether, or some other way, we must do this in the next few years.

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

- a. Community art;*
- b. Community centers and recreation;*
- c. Illegal dumping;*
- d. Beautification of streets and neighborhoods;*
- e. Improving infrastructure;*
- f. Trash pickup and recycling.*

As a critical part of improving the quality of life for my constituents, I have laid out my detailed plans to provide open communication and access for constituents, advocates, and everyone else. I will:

- **Open a District Office.** Working for the community should mean working IN the community. Constituents should not have to go all the way downtown to City Hall in order to meet with the Councilperson and their staff. I will set up an office located in the heart of Southeast Baltimore so that the resources and representation provided by her office are more accessible to constituents and advocates.
- **Set a new standard for frequency of communication.** My office will distribute a weekly newsletter that is made publicly available to everyone in the district, so that residents and businesses alike are aware of all upcoming events, meetings, and legislative activities for transparency and accountability.
- **Commit to a 48-hour response time for all constituent and advocate requests.** When it comes to local elected office, responsiveness is critical and I firmly believe that it should be easy and reliable to contact a Councilperson's office.

As another quality-of-life improvement, I plan to transform our recreation centers into hubs for community and youth support. Baltimore City's Department of Recreation and Parks has 44 recreational centers, and only 3 of them are in the First District. Having been born and raised in Baltimore, I know firsthand that these rec centers are

not able to service all the families who need them. Our rec center facilities can be transformed to have a much greater impact on our communities by offering resources like case management, mental health services, and job training skills. As Councilwoman, I will create a partnership to deliver case management services in rec centers, using the recent and successful Enoch Pratt Free Library partnership with the University of Maryland School of Social Work to bring trained graduate students into libraries as a model. I will partner with the Department of Recreation and Parks to apply this model to rec centers to provide community members with needed resources.

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

Baltimore is a City built by immigrants and today is no different. Immigration to Baltimore is a cornerstone of population and economic growth for the City, and local government has an important role to play in welcoming and supporting Baltimore's immigrants, documented and undocumented, into our social and economic life. The First District in Southeast Baltimore is home to the fastest-growing immigrant population in Maryland, and our immigrant neighbors need better support.

In order for immigrants to be welcomed into the Baltimore community, our government must deliberately take steps to ensure community engagement is effective and successful. One of the most practical ways to do this is by offering translation services at public meetings and other government fora. I plan to introduce legislation mandating that translation services be offered at all government meetings where a certain threshold of the engaged community speaks a language other than English. For example, in New York City, the number considered was 10%.

More comprehensively, I propose making Patterson High School a full-service community school welcoming immigrants regardless of status. Patterson is the City's most diverse high school and one of the most diverse in the state of Maryland, with roughly a third of the school's 1,000 students being foreign-born. I will partner with immigrants, advocates, and BCPS to pilot a full service community school model at Patterson High School serving immigrant students by studying schools in the Internationals Network, of which there are three in Maryland, but in particular, Oakland International High School, a national leader.

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

Housing is an essential human right, but too many people in Baltimore suffer from some kind of housing insecurity, whether that is a lack of adequate housing, being a rent-burdened household, or living under the threat of rent court and eviction.

Housing insecurity has a destabilizing effect on families and leads to negative health, education, and economic outcomes for children and adults. Furthermore, housing affordability is a challenge that disproportionately affects women: more than 40% of female-headed households with children in Baltimore are severely rent-burdened, and 79% of the cases that go to rent court involve women tenant-defendants. As Councilwoman, I will:

- **Advocate for more higher-density housing and commercial development.**

Building more homes and mixed-use developments that bring jobs and amenities to Baltimore is a good thing, if done correctly and responsibly. A simple key to making sure everyone benefits from new development is to embrace the benefits of higher densities and eliminate unnecessary rules like parking requirements, which can increase the cost of rent by hundreds of dollars per unit. Currently, Baltimore is ranked the 8th most difficult place to build apartments in the U.S.

I was particularly concerned last year when my opponent, Councilman Zeke Cohen, introduced legislation to establish a height overlay in our Fells Point neighborhood which would have hindered development and discouraged diversity. Luckily this initiative was defeated, but had it gone forward it would only have served to perpetuate the racial and economic segregation of our neighborhoods by making it nearly impossible for affordable housing to be built in that area. Southeast Baltimore needs a leader who has a progressive vision for the district and the City; I am prepared to be that Councilperson, and Zeke Cohen has proven that he is not.

- **Introduce a Tenants' Bill of Rights law to require landlords to provide tenants with their rights.** Renters make up the majority of Baltimore's residents (53%), yet many do not know that they have certain protections under the law. For example, some of the most commonly abused rights are the right to pay off late rent before being evicted or the right to complain without retaliation. When folks do not know their rights, they are at risk of having those rights violated and possibly eventually being evicted and becoming homeless. I am confident that if more renters were aware of their right to make a good faith complaint to their landlord about poor housing conditions, fewer Baltimoreans would be living in unsafe, unhealthy conditions.

When elected, I plan to build from the momentum of the recent False Representations and Unlawful Evictions state law and the Rental Licensing and Regulations local law by introducing a bill to require that landlords provide tenants with a Bill of Rights. We should remove barriers that renters face and reduce the number of people entering the eviction pipeline by making renters more aware of their legal rights, and this a good way to do it.

- **Advocate for increased affordable housing funding.** We can add affordable housing by supporting increased funding of the City's Affordable Housing Trust,

advocating for community benefits agreements (CBAs) for major developments, and supporting community land trusts (CLTs) and permanent affordable housing.

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

There is no magic formula to ensure that Baltimore has the incoming revenue needed to address our many systemic needs like infrastructure, schools, and an environmental crisis response plan (to name a few). That said, the current status quo of having a system that fails our citizens - highlighted by issues such as the Poe Homes Water Crisis last summer - are simply unacceptable.

I believe the only way forward is a commitment to open, inclusive and transparent processes of planning and implementation in close partnership. As such, I absolutely support working within all applicable public/private/nonprofit/advocate partnerships to explore every possible sustainable path to smart growth while also ensuring that we have the voice of the community engaged at all times, especially those historically underserved by our government.

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

I am an experienced political organizer, community activist, and native Southeast Baltimorean. From 2014 to 2015, I served as National Programs Director for the National Women's Political Caucus. In that role, I worked with women candidates from all over the country who were pro-choice, pro-ERA, and pro-universal healthcare, childcare, and eldercare.

In 2018, I ran for the Democratic State Central Committee because I wanted to help increase voter turnout and strengthen the organizing activities of the local Democratic party. I was the youngest person on the ballot and earned the second highest number of votes. I was then elected by my colleagues to serve as Chair of the 46th legislative district. Under my leadership, we were able to increase voter turnout by 56% in the 46th district and by 95% in the first councilmanic district. I am also a graduate of Emerge Maryland, a competitive candidate training program for Democratic women running for local and state elected office.

I believe that my training as a social worker, my experience with political organizing and advocacy, and my knowledge of the Baltimore community as a lifelong resident set me apart from other candidates and are powerful credentials for serving in public office. I am running because I want to improve the lives of my neighbors in Southeast Baltimore by ensuring that our government provides the most efficient City services

and social supports possible to help every resident thrive, especially those who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty.

Your website: parisbienert.com

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