

Candidate Name: Robert C. White,
Jr.

Office Sought: Councilmember,
At-Large

Email Address: robert@robertfordc.com

Phone Number: (202) 236-4074

Campaign Contact: Daniel Moskowitz, daniel@robertwhitefordc.com

Please attach a brief bio in addition to the questionnaire.

Introductory

Questions

1. What office are you seeking, and why did you decide to run for that office? If (re) elected, what are your priority areas of focus?

When I ran for office the first time, it was because I was watching my hometown change around me; my family members were getting displaced, businesses that I grew up around were closing, and people were getting left behind.

I knew that I could and should use the skills I learned from becoming a lawyer, working on Capitol Hill for Congresswoman Norton, and working for Attorney General Karl Racine, to help my community be a part of the prosperity that was seen around us but not with or for us.

As I run for re-election, I wish I could say that I found new reasons to run this time, but we are still in the fight for equity and inclusion. My priority areas remain education, housing, and employment. I am asking for residents for their vote again so that we can finish what we have started.

Budget

2. Do you consider the District's total current budget to be too large, too small, or about right? Please explain.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a massive loss of revenue, resulting in a much smaller budget than what we have become accustomed to, so I expect to see some really tough cuts in

the proposed budget this fiscal year.

We need to keep fighting for more federal dollars, especially the funds that we were shorted with Congress treated DC like a territory, instead of a state, costing us over \$700 Million in federal funds that could have helped our recovery efforts.

3. With unemployment, homelessness, and general economic distress at high levels, do you envision increasing safety net spending in future budgets? If so, which areas would you seek to expand?

Examining the revenue projections from the District's Chief Financial Officer, it is clear that we will not be able to fund as many programs as we have in previous years. Every program that is cut entirely or that has a decrease in funding will hurt in some way, visible or not.

We have to tap our emergency reserve funds to ensure our residents do not continue to struggle for months after the official public health emergency ends. We will need to expand rental assistance programs to prevent any residents from becoming homeless, protect the education dollars to ensure that our students continue to grow and develop, and we will need to give assistance to our small and local businesses, so that they can continue to employ residents and provide necessary benefits.

4. With the COVID-19 outbreak causing an economic downturn and stress on state and local budgets, would you support raising taxes to maintain current spending levels? If so, how should new revenue sources be targeted?

We can't raise taxes that will affect residents who already are struggling. As I mentioned before, we spent years creating and protecting a rainy day fund. The rainy day is here. We need to spend our reserve funds protecting our residents.

Transportation, Housing and Infrastructure

5. More than a third of DC residents do not own cars and automobile traffic significantly contributes to climate change. If elected, how will you work to improve public transportation in the District?

After years of declining ridership, we were finally seeing an increasing number of people use public transit. This, of course, was before the Covid-19 epidemic. Public transit is a basic necessity for residents who do not own cars and it has environmental benefits. We should be pushing as many people as possible to use our transit system and ensuring that the system is safe and reliable.

It may be quite a while before we can return to mass use of public transit, but when we can do so, we need to continue to encourage the use of public transit. As Chair of the committee that has oversight of WMATA, I co-introduced the Metro For DC Act introduced by Councilmember Charles Allen. The legislation incentivizes use of public transit while also establishing a fund to invest millions in expanding services to neighborhoods that have been historically left out of transit planning.

I have also been fighting for electrifying our bus fleet to reduce the health impacts on our residents, and for improved efficiency and reliability of bus service so that the Metro bus becomes a more viable transportation option for more residents.

If re-elected, I will continue to work on and support policies that expand the use and accessibility of public transit.

6. Other global cities are working to increase nearby access to amenities for all residents. For example, Paris recently announced a plan to become a “15-minute city” with grocery stores and other destinations located within a short walk of every home. What will you do to eliminate food deserts and improve local options throughout the District?

The COVID-19 outbreak has brought food deserts back to the forefront of equity issues that the District needs to prioritize. The lack of food options contributes to severe underlying health disparities in communities of color, and the absence of grocery retailers has worsened food access for families. The Mayor recently announced two agreements, investing hundreds of millions, to expand healthcare options with two new hospitals. We need similar action in order to eliminate food deserts. We have tried for years to convince retailers to come to the District, with no luck in getting them into the communities that need them most. It’s time to act and use our own funds to solve this, or we see people cycle through those two new hospitals with the same preventable health disparities as now.

7. As of 2019, there were 6,500 people in the District experiencing homelessness and the economic impact of COVID-19 will place a strain on thousands more. How do you plan on decreasing homelessness in a sustainable way?

We can only prevent homelessness by investing in people. In the most recent budget cycle, I committed \$20 million for the District’s Local Rent Supplement Program to support extremely low-income residents who need housing, and \$400,000 for the Emergency Rental Assistance Program, which provides emergency financial assistance to low-income people and families

facing eviction, and security deposit and first month's rent for families moving to new apartments. These are both critical programs that are usually the last option for families and prevent them from being evicted. I will continue to fund homelessness prevention options.

8. If (re) elected, what will you do to create and protect affordable housing for both home-buyers and renters?

There is no denying that the District is facing a housing crisis. With more people wanting to live in the District than available housing, we have a supply problem. We have to accelerate building of more housing for working-class people and for people with lower incomes.

Last year, as board chair of the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments, I led regional elected officials in a commitment to build 320,000 new housing units over the next ten years, with the vast majority of those housing options affordable to people with low and middle incomes. I have also been pushing hard of the District to think outside the box, like converting older, underutilized apartment buildings into workforce and low-income housing.

9. Revitalization in DC has created an increase in commercial and residential development. Though this revitalization is beneficial to the District, certain areas are not experiencing it at the same rate as other neighborhoods. What are your plans to ensure that all of DC benefits from periods of economic growth?

Where some people see "revitalization," others see certain displacement. We need first to change our view from economic development to community development. That is, while we develop new housing and amenities, we have to stop dropping the plans of strangers into people's neighborhoods. So, as we develop the city to create more housing and amenities, we have to engage the impacted communities and give them a seat at the table and protect them from displacement that, for years, has come after "revitalization." create an inclusive process to work together and plan what could best benefit each community.

10. Which recently revitalized DC neighborhood would you suggest as the best model for the city as a whole, and why?

I recently passed and got funded a bill to have the city help three businesses on Martin Luther King, Jr. Ave purchase the buildings they were renting in order to avoid displacement. Without this assistance, those Black-owned businesses would have been put out when their buildings were sold, and they would've been replaced by businesses that were not from the community. We see that happening across the city everyday. With the model I've pushed, the buildings can still be redeveloped, but the community now holds the keys to future development, not strangers.

***Educatio
n***

11. Do you think reform in the DC public schools is headed in the right direction? Explain your answer.

We have not closed the opportunity gap between white students and students of color. We have not done enough to fix our teacher retention problem. And we are not listening to parents as much as we are telling parents what is good for their children. The biggest problem we have in DC public education right now is that the people in charge refuse to acknowledge where we are falling short.

Some things are going well. We have improved our school buildings and increased the population of students in our public schools. But until the city is prepared to have an honest conversation about where we are falling short and make closing the opportunity gap it's highest priority, we will not be on the right path.

12. How do you suggest that we repurpose school properties that have been closed over the past few years?

By law, DC charter schools have a right of first refusal for closed DC Public Schools buildings. Regardless of the use, though, we should only be entering into temporary leases of no more than 10 years so that we are not permanently giving away schools buildings that we may need in the future.

13. How will you ensure equitable Special Education allocations across the city?

We should be looking at how to expand services and the number of schools where they are offered. A parent who lives east of the river reached out to me. She told me that every morning she had to wake up her children hours before school to make sure she could get them to two different schools across the city before going into work, and it was because there was only one school that provided the services her son needed to be able to thrive. Parents should not have to go to such length to have a chance at obtaining a great education and school experience. I will continue to talk to parents and educators so that I can continue to be a strong voice for students with special needs.

14. What accountability measures can you put into place to ensure that schools are staffed appropriately? What significant, unique policies would you put into place that would drastically increase the support and retention of teachers and administrators in DCPS?

We currently use the Comprehensive Staffing Model. I don't think that it captures what individual schools and students need. Creating a baseline is important, but we continue to see major flaws in the model. Schools need more experienced educators and staff, but more senior educators and staff generally have higher salaries. The Comprehensive Staffing Model doesn't take into account actual salaries, but rather average salaries. So we see tons of examples of schools that are not able to afford basic positions, and are incentivized to not have more experienced educators. We have to move to a model that encourages teachers to place roots at a school and really become a part of the community long-term.

Criminal Justice

15. Describe one aspect of an effective safety plan that would lower crime rates in DC without infringing on the constitutional rights of DC residents.

Public safety must become a central goal of our entire government. It is important that we understand there is no shortcut to reducing crime. We learned during the crime peak in the 1980s and 90s that trying to improve public safety by relying solely on police and prisons just kicks the can down the road. It has to be a holistic approach.

Without substantial investments in our students, stabilizing housing, and jobs, we will continue to see a spike in crime. We have the diagnosis, but we have not invested enough in the cure. In the past year, we have put a downpayment on crime intervention. I have funded some of this from my Committee. We have to push this investment further. These investments, in concert with community policing, will drive down crime and make our city safe.

16. How would improve reentry programs for returning citizens to ensure they are connected to gainful employment, education, and their families?

During my first term, I have led the Council in doubling the staff at the Mayor's Office of Returning Citizen Affairs. I wrote and funded the Returning Citizens Opportunity to Succeed Act, which provides free government IDs and birth certificates for returning citizens, a three-month transportation stipend, and additional transition support before residents leave

prison. These were all huge barriers to returning citizens looking for jobs and housing. I've introduced the Criminal Record Accuracy Assurance Act which prohibits background check companies from sharing arrests and charges that did not result in convictions or convictions that courts have expunged or sealed.

I have also been actively bringing attention to the urgent need for a high-quality residential reentry center, often referred to as a halfway house, to help our returning citizens transition back into our community. Hope Village is no longer operating and we have District residents being housed in Baltimore, separated from their family and their community. This will hurt their transition and it will limit our ability to connect them to the proper resources. We have to continue working to ensure the District has its own residential reentry center and bring our men and women home.

Wages and Labor

17. What initiatives would you propose to ensure that minority- and woman-owned business enterprises are able to compete for projects, particularly District construction and development?

One of the first bills I passed in the Council did exactly this by setting aside the last remaining medical marijuana licenses for local women and minority-owned businesses. Additionally, in my first year as Chair of the Committee on Facilities of Procurement, I introduced the Small Business Procurement Reform Omnibus Act, which will close loopholes in the Certified Business Enterprise program, prevent outside companies from claiming to be DC companies, and push our government to give more contracts to DC small businesses, and ensure faster payment for subcontractors on District government projects.

Very few industries have a substantial presence of women and minorities at the top because of the legacy of discrimination. So, I continually look intentionally for opportunities to use my leverage and access to carve out substantial participation for women and minorities- particularly in new industries and in city contracts.

Government Accountability

18. Do you believe that the current DC Council represents the interests of the broad public? If not, what segments of the public are underrepresented?

The DC Council represents the people who cast their ballots. We have a very low voter turnout in the District, and as helpful as it is to have allies and advocates push for policies on

behalf of residents, the final council vote is cast by the person elected. We will continue to see votes that are not reflective of the priorities and values of our residents if we do not aggressively work to expand voting participation and increase sustained civic engagement from our most affected communities.

19. How will you demonstrate accessibility and responsiveness to your constituents?

During my first term, I created a robust outreach plan for myself and the office, and I change my outreach efforts every year to ensure that I am finding new ways to connect with and hear from residents .

In each ward, I held community office hours and meet and greets. We also knocked on doors in each ward to introduce ourselves and connect to the people that we serve.

I created an annual goal for my office to visit each Advisory Neighborhood Commission, and a goal of visiting several a month for myself. My office averages about 300 community meetings each year, where we talk to residents and take copies of my monthly newsletter and guides on how to testify at the Council.

I also visit senior homes in each ward, as I know it can be tough for our older residents to get in touch with elected officials, and they don't often have social media to get connected to resources or information.

20. This is the first campaign cycle conducted with the Fair Elections Program, which provides public financing for candidates who adhere to small-dollar contribution limits. Do you believe that a candidate who is not participating in this program can adequately represent the views of all residents of the District?

Yes. I co-sponsored the Fair Elections legislation and am a big supporter of the program. The program still has a few areas that need to be worked out, so I am using the same model as my last campaign. Specifically, the fair elections program allots the same funding for a candidate who must compete in both the Democratic primary and the general election as it does for Independents running only in the general election. Without knowing when you file as a candidate whether you will have a competitive primary, there is a risk that your campaign will be out of money after the primary while candidates running only in the general election have full financial resources. It is not surprising that we are uncovering some things that we need to tweak in this law as it is a new program. As our first class of candidates run races with the fair elections program, I assume we will find some other things we will need to address.

In DC and across the country, many elected officials have served in office with distinction

and integrity without a fair elections program. The same is true now. While fair elections is a very important tool to reduce incumbency protections, it is not a replacement or proxy for integrity.

21. Other suggested campaign reforms include ranked-choice voting and lowering the voting age to 16. What changes would you support to ensure that our elections truly represent the will of the people?

Ranked-choice voting is a policy that I am open to and learning more about. I worry a great deal about our low voter participation, so any reforms to our election systems should be done with an abundance of caution to ensure we do not see any unintended consequences.

I was a proud co-introducer of the Youth Vote Amendment Act of 2018 and was disappointed when it did not pass. If the issue comes before the council again, I plan to support it.

To represent the will of the people, we have to include all of our people. In 2019, I introduced the Restore the Vote Act, to make the District the first jurisdiction to give incarcerated residents with felony convictions their right to vote. I strongly believe that, while a conviction or sentence may take away some rights, it does not take away all your rights. Incarcerated residents should not lose their right to vote as it is the most fundamental right in a democracy. The people most impacted by over-incarceration must have a voice in our democracy.

Biography

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Robert C. White, Jr. is an At-Large Member of the Council of the District of Columbia, Chair of the Committee on Facilities and Procurement, and Vice Chair of the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments' Board of Directors.

Robert graduated from Archbishop Carroll High School in Washington DC and attended St. Mary's College of Maryland, earning degrees in Philosophy and Political Science and completing additional studies at Oxford University in England and in The Gambia, West Africa. Robert earned his law degree from the American University Washington College of Law.

In 2008, Robert went to the United States Congress to serve as Legislative Counsel to Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton. He served as a lead staffer on congressional oversight hearings related to DC and helped draft legislation to loosen Congress' grip on the DC government and to give greater autonomy and independence to DC residents.

In 2014, Robert was tapped by Attorney General Karl A. Racine to serve as the first Director of Community Outreach for the DC Office of the Attorney General. There, Robert worked to design and execute a blueprint for community engagement with a focus on improving services and support for the city's most vulnerable residents.

Robert and his wife, Christy, an attorney with the US Securities and Exchange Commission, reside in Ward 4 with their daughters, Madison and Monroe, and rescue pit bull, Roscoe. They attend St. Martin's Catholic Church. Robert loves spending time with his family, reading, and riding his motorcycle.