

Answers of Thiru Vignarajah for Housing, Trans. and Fair Dev. Forum

Housing, Transportation and Fair Development Mayoral Forum

May 19 from 6:00pm to 8:00pm

Questions REVISED 5-14-20 (Note: Only question one has been revised to include homelessness)

Candidates must respond in writing on or before May 15 to all 10 questions. Please submit responses to Matt Hill, hillm@publicjustice.org Responses will be posted on the web the day of the forum on May 19. Candidates will be asked for a verbal response to at least the first 6 questions at the forum. Candidate surrogates are not allowed to substitute for the candidate at the forum. Details about participation in the virtual forum on the webex platform will be provided shortly.

QUESTIONS

1. The COVID-19 crisis threatens tens of thousands of Baltimore City households with eviction, foreclosure, and additional stress on our transportation network. Additionally, hundreds of people remain homeless and at serious risk of infecting themselves and others in congregate shelters and encampments. What specific measures would you take to help City residents avoid homelessness, eviction, foreclosure and additional deterioration of our transportation infrastructure?

COVID-19 has compounded the already dire lack of health care in shelters and encampments. Especially given the health risks already facing these vulnerable groups, we must implement policies to meet the specific needs of individuals experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity such that we lower both infection and transmission rates.

We have set forth policies to address concerns related to homelessness given the near-term risk of COVID-19, and we have also issued long-term policies to dramatically reduce the risk of eviction or foreclosure permanently. We have proposed partnerships with public and philanthropic partners to establish a fund supporting first responders, essential workers, homeless individuals, and their families. Relief efforts paid for through these donations will be focused on alternative housing such as hotel rooms and converting currently unoccupied government buildings to living spaces for self-isolation.

I also support forming partnerships to address existing deficiencies in housing security by collaborating with the Maryland Department of Housing Services, which operates the Homelessness Prevention Program (HPP); local non-profits; and private sector stakeholders to expand eviction prevention policies safeguarding renters in need of short-term assistance. The outcome would model itself after programs like HomeStart in Boston that use flexible monetary funds, legal and financial advice, and local knowledge to help renters at risk of eviction remain in their homes. In addition to the services provided to renters, the collaborative would work with landlords on eviction prevention partnerships, which would give tenants improved housing security while helping landlords sustainably avoid the significant costs associated with executing an eviction. In these instances, low-interest loans to the renter could satisfy both the landlord and renter while avoiding costly, harmful evictions.

The global pandemic presents a once-in-a-century challenge to our city, the county, and the world. It also offers a rare opportunity to rebuild, reinvest, and reimagine the economy and infrastructure of Baltimore for the 21st century. Our roads and transit system are empty. We should use this time to invest significantly in rebuilding our infrastructure for decades to come. We have proposed not only an immediate injection of \$250 million from the ‘Rainy Day Fund,’ but also an unprecedented \$4 billion investment in an infrastructure overhaul.

2. Fair Development centers our fundamental needs for housing, health care, work with dignity, education and a sustainable environment, in government housing and economic development policies, thereby advancing dignity for all Baltimore residents. Will your administration advance fair development in environmental policies? If so, will those policies include ending the city’s contract with the BRESCO incinerator and fully implementing a Zero Waste plan that will address toxic pollution and waste in the City and how?

Environmental racism continues to persist in Baltimore—and not just from facilities sited half a century ago, but with recent siting decisions in the past two few decades. While I applaud efforts to encourage an “equity screen” of various budget decisions, the reality continues that polluting facilities, like the incinerator, are disproportionately sited in communities of color. This isn’t just about spending money, it’s about structural racism cloaked in land use decisions.

I proposed that any industrial facility or energy generating facility require an cumulative impacts analysis similar to NEPA (before Trump’s illegal rollback) or California’s Environmental Quality Act (CEQA)—and a commensurate level of sustained public outreach in the communities most affected. The aggregate impacts of the siting of power plants and industrial facilities close to neighborhoods, combined with the locations of I-95 and I-83 bringing cars and heavy-duty trucks to through city neighborhoods while spewing particulate matter and NOx, continue to be a public health disaster – even after years of efforts to reduce ozone and other forms of pollution. I will launch unprecedented efforts to ensure existing facilities are fulfilling their permit responsibilities (by working with MDE and EPA), including increasing publicly accessible fence-line monitoring data; and I will invest heavily in the remediation of brownfield sites to reduce the rates of cancer and other illnesses.

A symbol of Baltimore simply cannot be a trash burner’s stack. No strategy that solely depends upon “starving the beast,” as suggested in the Sustainability Plan, will ever work because the loss of city trash will just be displaced by trash from other communities. The fact that this facility is not required to disclose its levels of pollution through the Toxic Release Inventory is an absolute disgrace and an abuse of a massive loophole. My closure strategy will be three fold: 1) Win the lawsuit brought by the incinerators against the Baltimore Clean Air Act to require higher standards and continuous monitoring; 2) Sue MDE, EPA, and the incinerators for failing to enforce pollution limits and other permit conditions (the last facility wide inspection was three years ago); 3) End the Wheelabrator contract when it expires next year; and 4) Negotiate or force the facility’s closure with Macquarie.

In addition to much greater public input into land use decisions, more stringent facility standards/pollution controls, and permanently closing the incinerator, our long-term commitment

to Fair Development includes a rapid transition to clean energy, electric vehicles/alternative transportation, reforestation, and other policies that improve the quality of life and the dignity of every Baltimore resident.

3. The official count of vacant properties in Baltimore is 16,000. If elected Mayor, will you commit to using the funding and policy tools at your disposal to (a) convert at least 500 more properties a year from vacancy to occupancy, while prioritizing the needs of community residents living in neighborhoods with vacant structures, and (b) support estate planning for elderly residents to reduce the number of properties becoming vacant?

Despite nearly 17,000 vacant properties in Baltimore, access to affordable housing remains an obstacle for too many. We have put forth aggressive proposals not only to reduce the vacant housing lot, but also to expand access to affordable housing and assistance for elderly, housing-insecure residents.

We have committed to bringing back the Dollar Vacant Homes Program, this time with City co-investment and the purchase of insurance against declining property values to make lending more attractive to local banks.

We will also seize and sell property with excessive code violations and unpaid taxes, and transfer those properties to affordable housing organizations, thereby raising additional revenue and creating affordable housing. We will build emergency shelter housing without limitations on the duration of stay; invest and support community land trusts; remove zoning restrictions that pose barriers to new affordable housing units; enforce restrictions requiring developers to build affordable housing in high opportunity areas; and create programs to assist seniors safely and securely “aging in place” with rent protection. Revitalizing the development of affordable housing across Baltimore requires a concentrated, deliberate effort from all stakeholders.

4. Baltimore City faces a wave of likely eviction actions due to COVID-19, and it is far from ready. Yet, evictions were already a crisis prior to COVID. Approximately 140,000 eviction cases are filed and almost 6,500 families are evicted each year with many becoming homeless. These evictions have a disparate impact on Black households and female-headed households and reinforce segregation. Baltimore Renters United is releasing a report stating that by investing \$5.7 million each year in a right to counsel in evictions, the City and State would realize \$35.6 million in benefits and costs avoided. How will you address evictions and will your plan include a right to counsel in eviction cases?

Yes. In the short-term, evictions should be frozen. In the long-term, right to counsel is the best safeguard as we have seen in numerous civil contexts where critical assets like housing is at stake. The return on investment for guaranteeing fully funded right to counsel is clear and well documented. Expanding Civil Gideon is long overdue and we have already committed to guaranteeing right to counsel in contexts like this, not just for housing disputes, but also in immigration proceedings and where parental rights are at stake. Put simply, if someone is at risk of losing their home, their child, or their country, they should have guaranteed counsel to protect and defend their rights.

5. In 2018, the City made a historic agreement with the Fair Development Roundtable and Community Development Network to fund the Affordable Housing Trust Fund at \$20 million/year. Yet, the revenue actually coming into the fund is far less than promised, and the proposed FY 2021 capital budget for DHCD is almost 40% lower than last year. Would your administration meet the City's obligation to fund the Affordable Housing Trust Fund with at least \$20 million/year without cutting other affordable housing funds and how? What other policies would you promote to support the development of affordable housing as well as ending homelessness?

Yes. It is unacceptable that we have close to 17,000 vacant properties and lack affordable housing. I will fulfill the obligation to the Affordable Housing Trust Fund and implement policies to expand affordable housing. As mentioned above, we will seize and sell property with excessive code violations and unpaid taxes, and transfer those properties to affordable housing organizations. We will also enforce restrictions requiring developers to build affordable housing in high opportunity areas that have been overlooked or unenforced in recent years.

6. Light rail has emerged as the most robust generator of economic development across the nation over the last four decades. Seattle, Portland, Los Angeles, Denver, Charlotte, Dallas are excellent examples. How would you direct and encourage Baltimore City and regional housing and development planners to support the completion of the Red Line light rail project in order to achieve improved transit equity, reduced commute times, preservation of affordable housing, and the transformative community economic growth that follows transportation systems anchored by light rail?

I plan to invest in transit expansion in a sustainable, environmentally conscious manner. The decision to kill the Red Line was not simply a transportation decision—it prevented economic opportunities for tens of thousands of Baltimoreans.

While I will do everything in my power to restart a Red Line 2.0 with the goal of completion by 2028, I will immediately start a free East to West bus system. Currently, our East to West avenues are dedicated to motor traffic. On day one as mayor, I intend to repurpose one of the avenues exclusively for public and green transportation. We will provide free East to West busses, bike lanes, and pedestrian passages along this avenue. The elimination of cars from this passage would improve the safety of bicyclists and pedestrians by simply reducing the volume of traffic. My vision is that we quickly demonstrate demand for East-West transit to restart the Red Line 2.0 and then expand the free bus lines to include North to South and diagonal lines resulting in a better connected and greener city.

7. In the transportation industry, "Development Follows Rail" is a proven mantra. Accordingly, not one community economic development project is associated with the bus-focused Baltimore Link system. Banks don't invest in bus stops. How would you re-direct or incentivize local and regional housing and development planners to pair transportation and land use in a long-needed, comprehensive development vision for Baltimore that includes emergency measures to provide permanently affordable housing?

Part of the reason why investment has flowed to affluent neighborhoods, and out of neighborhoods that desperately need it, is because the City has no master plan with respect to its investment and the corrupt pay-to-play culture has rewarded developers at the expense of neighborhood residents. We will develop a master plan for investment that will equitably guide investments and prioritize City support and resources in neighborhoods where private investment has to be encouraged instead of simply allowed. Tax incentives, TIFs, and Affordable Housing Trust Fund mandates when used, should first be deployed to neighborhoods that are struggling to attract investment instead of as a tool simply to lower the cost of investments that were already going to happen. We must leverage incentives and mandates to create inclusive growth and transit-oriented developments beyond rail. This requires expanding land use incentives to pedestrian, bike, and bus lines to create a sustainable and vibrant micro-economy within neighborhoods.

8. Fair Development also demands that the City redress the harms of racism and predatory capitalism in the City's non-participatory budgeting process, the lack of access to capital among Black households and businesses, and the long history of exploitation in the workplace. Will you advance fair development in budgeting, banking, and the workplace? If so, will those policies include A) implementing a participatory and/or legislative budgeting process, B) prioritizing worker co-ops in City contracts, and C) conducting a feasibility study of a public bank in Baltimore City?

Yes. Today, our budgetary decisions lack transparency, we fail to prioritize worker protections and input in City contracts, and too many in Baltimore lack access to basic financial services.

We have pledged to present every item on the Board of Estimates' agenda in plain English at least 2 days before the weekly vote, make it clear who receives money and for what from City contracts, and refuse political donations from any individual or company with business before the city that is not subject to blind competitive bidding.

We have committed to supporting legislation that would require all City contractors provide health benefits to their employees, undergo health and safety inspections, and pay prevailing wages. We will also disqualify companies with a history of violating wage and labor laws.

The financial literacy drought hits hardest in low income communities that aren't serviced by banks. I would support a feasibility study on the creation of a public bank that would provide standard financial services. By providing basic services such as savings accounts and small-dollar loans, struggling families are given a partner that does not have an incentive to employ expensive and predatory practices.

9. Baltimore renters are often forced to live in substandard rental housing with mold infestation being one of the more dangerous and unaddressed issues. Some cities like Washington D.C., are exploring comprehensive mold regulations. Other jurisdictions have more rigorous rental licensing laws that do not allow the landlord to choose and hire the inspector charged with inspecting the property before the landlord can get a license. How would you address the serious threats to life, health and safety in Baltimore's rental housing?

The challenge with mold infestation is not identifying the problem, but rather insufficient strategic action. The City protocols remain far too reactionary; and houses infested with mold are concentrated in low-income, predominantly black and brown neighborhoods where landlords are reluctant to invest in addressing the issue. The current policies allowing landlords to exercise discretion over the inspector fail to address the root cause of the issue, eradicate the health risk, and protect the renter. I will take responsibility for ensuring we set stringent standards that do not allow landlords to handpick inspectors so that we prioritize the health and safety of Baltimore's rental housing.

10. Decades of racial segregation and disinvestment have produced neighborhood and housing conditions that have a negative impact on the physical and mental health of many Baltimore residents every day. The major health institutions in our city can play a more active role in addressing these issues, in partnership with City government and community-based organizations. Please describe how you as mayor will better align health institutions' support for making measurable improvements in City neighborhood and housing conditions?

Despite housing world-class health institutions, Baltimore suffers from longstanding inequities and systemic disinvestment that places communities of color and low-income populations at higher risk.

Local health institutions are required to spend a portion of revenues on local health projects, which can include housing improvements. The current health crisis has emphasized the digital divide in Baltimore and the importance of access to telemedicine infrastructure. City Hall will partner with health institutions to provide internet and computer access to all public housing units. This allows patients to conveniently communicate with care providers. Telemedicine eradicates transit barriers to visiting a professional and enables real-time assessment of health issues, in turn enabling quick action to treat serious concerns. Investing in digital infrastructure will also create overarching benefits to public health by allowing children to remain engaged with their education, granting access to information and news updates, and eliminating barriers to job and assistance program applications.

Modern solutions to accessing health care will not eliminate longstanding housing conditions that contribute to health problems and have gone overlooked and unaddressed. This includes issues like lead poisoning. Baltimore has a complicated history with lead poisoning, from Baltimore's first-in-the-nation ban of lead paint in 1951 (27 years before the federal ban) to Kennedy Krieger Institute's unethical study of largely, low-income, black Baltimore city residents living in houses with lead poisoning in the 1990s. Baltimore has made significant improvements in the last fifteen years, reducing the number of children testing positive for lead paint by 97% from 1992 to 2016. Yet, thousands of old homes still have unabated lead paint. Under my administration, Baltimore will require water testing across the entire city, including all high risk locations; replace all lead service lines (through a partnership with local hospitals, who are required to spend a portion of revenues on local health projects, the state (DWSRF), and EPA); and provide filtration systems as a stop-gap for homes that need immediate relief until construction is completed.