

Forest Park Civic Association

Questionnaire

Ward 6 - City Council Candidates

These questions were sent by the FPCA to the Ward 6 candidates, Amaad River and Keith Wright. The answers were not edited, but are presented here as written and returned to us. The FPCA generated this questionnaire, so that Forest Park Voters can go to the polls knowing how the candidates stand on issues that are important to our neighborhood.

Q1. What do you see as the role of the city councilor in the strong mayor form of government that we have in Springfield?

Answers:

Amaad Rivera:

While Springfield, along with several other municipalities in Massachusetts such as Boston, has a strong mayoral form of government, the City Council should act as a check and balance to ensure effective governance. In addition, a City Councilor in a ward based system is a liaison between the community and the city to ensure that concerns, issues and needs are addressed.

Please feel free to check out my website (www.amaadriviera.com) on how I lead on the issues that will bring the progress needed as your city councilor

According to our town charter and historical practice, the Springfield City Council holds three major tools to help support the governance of the City:

Ordinance and Resolve Passage: This particular power, arguable the most important component of a City Councilor position, helps to shape the direction of the city in various city-based activities. The ordinances, reviews and resolves range in impact and implementation. Recent ordinances such as The Living Wage ordinance, Responsible Employer Ordinance directly impact our economic development. In addition, Special Permit Approval for particular land use is an important aspect that impacts the physical use of city of Springfield. As an additional note, the Special Permit Review process will change with the passage of a new zoning modernization act. Lastly, resolves such as the resolve to support three pieces of state legislation to stop the millions of dollars of wealth loss to Massachusetts through foreclosures, demonstrate the broad array of issues that a City Councilor must take leadership on to make decisive actions. This is why we need a City Councilor in Ward 6 who understands the issues that affect all of Forest Park, and brings people together to solve these challenges.

Department Audit: While this particular aspect of our City Council has not been fully utilized, it is essential to creating accountability, especially in a strong mayoral form of government. The City Council has the ability to examine, often called an audit, the policies, protocols and plans of any department within the City of Springfield. In times in which this city has struggled with issues of transparency, it is important for a City Councilor to take leadership in accountability and forcing transparency.

Budget Approval: Lastly, the City Council approves the budget for the entire City. It is important to note, that city employees including teachers, are not allowed to vote in any fiscal decision that would affect their occupation or department. In essence city employee must remove themselves for the entirety of discussion and vote that is connected with their occupation, so a teacher could not vote on any aspect of education budget.

Keith Wright:

The role of the city councilor in our Plan A form of government is an important one. The council provides financial oversight by approving or diminishing the mayor's proposed budget. It can pass ordinances on a wide range of topics and decide zoning issues that affect our quality of life. It can hold hearings to provide oversight to the executive branch and to bring attention to important issues affecting our city. A councilor can use his or her position as a bully pulpit to raise awareness and provide leadership about issues important to Springfield. A councilor should be a cheerleader and a marketer and an advocate.

***Forest Park Civic Association
Questionnaire
Ward 6 - City Council Candidates***

With that said, there are some limitations to the role of the Councilor. The Council cannot spend money and it does not have a budget that would allow it to initiate programs that cost money without the prior support of the mayor. For this reason, I have been careful in my campaign to not promise what I cannot deliver. With the new ward representation, I will be able to provide constituent service—I promise to respond to the calls and concerns of constituents from Ward 6.

Q2. Have you read the Urban Land Institute report on Springfield? In your opinion, which of its recommendations should be priorities in the Forest Park Neighborhood? What can the City Council do to move these recommendations forward? What will you do to move these recommendations forward?

Answers:

Keith Wright:

I have read the Urban Land Institute's 2006 report that offers strategies for making Springfield a sustainable city. One of my favorite quotes in the report is "Springfield has a comeback story to tell." I agree. My wife and I chose to live in this city because we value its rich civic life, its architecture, its parks, and its history, and we believe that over time Springfield can regain its place as the cultural and economic center of western Massachusetts. The report has a city-wide focus for the most part, but obviously, recommendations that are good for Springfield are good for the Ward.

It is clear that Springfield has taken many of the recommendations to heart as some of them have already come to pass. These include an additional term for the control board (2007 – 2009) and the demolition of the York Street Jail. Some recommendations are in progress, such as good government practices and fiscal responsibility. I entered this campaign out of a concern for the financial health of our city. The report urges our city to continue to make progress in creating an ethical, transparent, and efficient city government.

The ULI report emphasizes that no city will prosper if its downtown is left to decay. The city has employed an economic development strategy of using public investment to spur further private investment in the South End and on the State Street corridor. My hope is that the city creates a stronger link with the University of Massachusetts' multi-million dollar research capacity to spur innovation that leads to small and medium-sized business development, and I believe Court Square is a good location for an established UMASS presence. Clearly, the city needs to continue to address issues of crime in the downtown, and one way to do that is to increase its economic vitality by ensuring a strong downtown workforce. Having tenants in the old Federal Building is a step in the right direction.

On a ward level, the ULI report emphasizes something that attracted my wife and me to our neighborhood—Forest Park, both the neighborhood and the actual park itself. Forest Park and East Forest Park are desirable neighborhoods in which to live, with good restaurants, a gem of a park, historic architecture, and people who take pride in our city. Much of our housing stock is beautiful and much less expensive than other places in the region.

Despite these advantages, there is room for improvement. The ULI report encourages the city to use a carrot and stick approach that targets code enforcement but that also uses Community Development Block Grant and other monies to help land owners to maintain and improve their neighborhoods. Two places in Ward 6 that residents have spoken to me about are The X and Belmont Avenue. People would like to see more opportunities for shopping at The X, and they feel that Belmont Avenue could use a face lift. I am also anxious for The Bing arts center to be fully on line. Ward 6 has historically been the home of a good combination of the arts, restaurants, and shopping, and I believe this combination is going to return and make our quality of life even better.

As a City Councilor, I would take many of the recommendations of the Urban Land Institute to heart. My highest priority is to ensure that our city government continues to make progress in creating a city government that is transparent, ethical, and efficient. As a Ward 6 Councilor, I plan to advocate for my Ward when development monies are available. I plan to provide constituent service when a citizen of the ward has difficulty in getting results or information from our city government.

***Forest Park Civic Association
Questionnaire
Ward 6 - City Council Candidates***

Amaad Rivera:

Yes. As a side note, there have been several reports by the Urban Land Institute that include recommendations for the City of Springfield. In particular the 2006 report has been the most detailed in specific about board based issues and recommendations to create a more sustainable community. While I support some of the specific recommendations, and even more supportive of their findings, with the predicted passage of the zoning modernization act that FPCA supports, most recommendations will be decided by a planning board panel and not a City Councilor.

Several other reports that were published have much more relevance to the City Council as they focus on the economic growth of the city. Studies by the Federal Reserve on building a more prosperous Springfield and MassInc's study on Gateway Cities provide a much more relevant policies issues facing the city council.

These reports support residency based requirements for city based jobs, of which I am only candidate in Ward 6 openly supporting this policy. In addition, these reports support the uplift of our diverse communities to attract people to live and work within our city limits.

My campaign has focused on providing leadership that brings our communities together to highlight our diversity and to solve our issues together. Forest Park is the most diverse community in Springfield, having nearly 5 languages spoken within in boundaries, the wealthiest as well as the lowest income and people from all over the world, these studies show that is essential to capitalize on assets to increase our economic disposition.

In addition, these report speak to the need for college access for our young people, that is my I am proposing an Springfield-based AmeriCorp program that will provide young people with scholarships while they are giving back to their community.

Lastly, all the mentioned reports including the ULI, recommend utilizing redevelopment that supports green growth strategies. As the only candidate in ward 6 to be endorsed by the Sierra Club, Massachusetts Chapter, I am committed to making Springfield greener by increasing recycling rates as well as working with our government for greener building standards.

Q3. The City Council recently failed to vote on passage of the proposed new zoning ordinance for the City of Springfield, wasting thousands of dollars of taxpayer money and city employee time. It took months of work with input from a diverse group of Springfield residents and interests to come up with the revised zoning ordinance. To have it discarded so quickly and casually is an insult to the people who worked on it and a disservice to Springfield residents and businesses who need it. What is your position on the proposed new zoning ordinance? If you support it, what will you do to insure its passage? If you do not support it, please give your reasons.

Answers:

Amaad Rivera:

I support the new zoning modernization act. While it seems that this question already has an assumption of the nature of its passage, the act has been moved to a different date for its approval and has not been voted down. This was due in part to several areas of concerns that were raised at public hearings. These concerns which included notices of zoning issues and threshold approval limits were legitimate issues raised by residents. In addition, the final revised act was only available for limited time in which it was offered to the public.

As a candidate who appreciates the active involvement in residents in their community, I do not find that standard practices of revisions and democratic process to be a problem as we move forward to pass this much needed modernization. I look forward to its passage and board support among residents and other city councilors.

Forest Park Civic Association
Questionnaire
Ward 6 - City Council Candidates

Keith Wright:

Zoning is the most important tool the city has to manage land use, guide development, and assure the integrity of our neighborhoods. Zoning regulations are established by vote of the City Council and managed by the professional staff in the Office of Planning and Economic Development.

I have testified twice before the City Council in favor of the Zoning Modernization Plan. The proposed ordinance introduces a process called site plan review. This process will increase the ability for citizens and neighbors to provide input into the planning process. The plan sets out clear and consistent criteria against which proposals will be evaluated.

The City Council had the chance to vote for this ordinance at a September 25 meeting but voted to refer it back to committee due to a large number of last-minute amendment proposals from members of the business community. I believe that before the new council takes office the current council will pass this ordinance. In the event that it does not, I will provide leadership to ensure that this ordinance is passed. It is long overdue and it will increase citizen input about how our city is developed.

Q4. The City Council presently issues Special Permits and attaches restrictions to the special permits including the hours of allowed operation., number of cars allowed for auto oriented businesses, parking restrictions, etc. Once a special permit is passed by the City Council, the zoning administrator of the city has the responsibility of insuring compliance. While they actively respond to complaints from the neighborhoods, their limited resources mean that the bulk of the responsibility of reporting noncompliance falls on the neighborhoods. What can be done to shift the burden of responsibility to the City? What will you do to insure that there is strong enforcement of the special permits?

Answers:

Keith Wright:

One of the most important responsibilities of the City Council is granting Special Permits for exceptions to the city's zoning ordinances. Special permits are frequently requested by businesses wishing to conduct activities that do not comply with zoning regulations. Neighborhood activists often complain that once the permit is granted, the specific provisions are ignored. For example, a permit granted to allow for the sale of 10 used cars at a particular site, without monitoring, can easily become 30.

Once a permit has been granted there is no strong system to monitor for compliance. By default, monitoring compliance becomes the job of neighborhood activists. Technically, monitoring should fall to the Code Enforcement department, but with current staffing levels this department is often only able to address code violations that pertain to safety and severe blight. They do not have the manpower to fully monitor compliance with provisions of special permits. Under the current economic constraints, this will not change any time soon.

If elected, I commit to monitor compliance for any special permit granted for Ward 6 on which I vote and I am calling on councilors representing other Wards to do the same. We should not be granting special permits without a plan in place to monitor for compliance. If elected, I will ask my colleagues to join me in this important work.

This initiative is part of my commitment to focus on quality of life issues in Ward 6 and across the City. I teach my students that they must take responsibility for their actions. The same applies to actions of the City Council. Granting a special permit carries the responsibility to ensure compliance with its provisions.

Amaad Rivera:

As stated earlier, the current zoning modernization act that FCPA supports would remove this particular concern away from individual city councilors and shift this responsibility to a Planning Board panel. Despite the repetiveness of similar questions, a serious issue within this questions is important to address. Springfield, unlike other municipalities of its size, does not have a city-based Compliance Officer. This role as well as department would help to both address our code violations as well as enforcement of special

Forest Park Civic Association
Questionnaire
Ward 6 - City Council Candidates

permits. This particular remedy would both work without a zoning modernization as well as within the new framework.

Q5. Presently, the Planning Department requires petitioners for a zone change, special permits, or variances, to present their plan to the neighborhood council/civic associations prior to the issue being taken up by the City Council. Frequently, the City Council either ignores the suggestions made by the neighborhood or works with the petitioner directly to come up with a compromise without input from the neighborhood. What method of mutual cooperation, that includes the petitioner and the neighborhood will you work to implement?

Answers:

Amaad Rivera:

In other municipalities, similar land use issues, are usually open to a public forum within the community with notice of changes delivered directly through email, municipal website or posted within the walls of a City Hall. This enables for broad community engagement that becomes a systemic process which ensures efficiency. I will work towards ensuring that all of Forest Park has the opportunity to be engaged, of their own will, with land use issues that affect them directly.

Keith Wright:

As a member of the Forest Park Civic Association I believe that the City Council should be listen to neighborhood councils and civic associations during zoning meetings. I also believe that it should rely more on the expertise of the Office of Planning and Economic Development when granting special permits. As a councilor, I will be committed to working with all of the concerned parties in order to reach a decision that benefits the neighborhood. For Ward 6, ideally a person seeking a variance would first sort out their issues with either the East Forest Park or Forest Park Civic Association, as well as any other interested parties. I have experience as a meeting facilitator and I am willing to bring various parties together to resolve contentious issues.

Q6. Bright Nights is a longstanding event which has brought success for the city and is a challenge to the neighborhood. The event continues to inconvenience users of the park. Displays are put up in September, and often not removed until March, turning the park into a fair ground. What can be done to minimize the effects of Bright Nights on the park? What will you do to make this happen?

Answers:

Keith Wright:

As a neighbor of Forest Park, friends often ask me if Bright Nights is a pain or a pleasure. I think it is a wonderful thing for our community because it brings out-of-town visitors to our city and it provides children of all ages with magic and festivity. However, I know that some residents are still recovering from a time when the traffic was not managed as well. I am pleased to see how much more smoothly traffic has flowed over the past couple of years. If people do have problems with some aspect of Bright Nights the first thing they should do is check in with Spirit of Springfield, the civic-minded organization dedicated to promoting civic pride through large events like the World's Largest Pancake Breakfast and Bright Nights. If that does not yield any result, I have campaigned on a platform that includes constituent service. I will be happy to look into constituents' concerns.

Amaad Rivera:

As a lifelong resident, I have enjoyed the pride that comes with such a longstanding event that brings communities, families and people from all over to enjoy our great neighborhood. While I can imagine that issues arise, I feel confident that my leadership that brings people together will enable us to solve any concerns that may come with this attraction.

Forest Park Civic Association
Questionnaire
Ward 6 - City Council Candidates

Q7. Recently, two incidents occurred in Forest Park that have raised the issue of safety. There was a shooting at the basketball court, only a short distance away from where 8-10 year old girls were having soccer practice and a young child was attacked and had a cell phone violently stolen from them. To make the park safer, the Parks Dept. discussed having a "pass system " for the basketball area, but nothing came of it . For a while, there was a police cruiser present between 4-6 pm , but that has stopped. We understand that a full time police presence is too costly, but something needs to be done. There has been longstanding cooperation between the Parks Department and the Forest Park Civic Association and neighborhood residents, but this issue has not been solved. What should be done to help make Forest Park safer and what will you do to make this happen?

Answers:

Amaad Rivera:

I do not agree with a "pass system" for the basketball area, as it is waste of tax payers money to a resource that is currently free to the community. This shooting as well as the recent shooting of a young person near Forest Park is a telling sign that our young people do not have safe spaces within the boundaries of our community.

Sadly, Forest Park does not have a community center, our library is closed and our resource strapped learning institutions do not have nearly enough afterschool programming.

I understand that by ensuring the protection of our young people, we are protecting our community and this why I am committed to building a Springfield-based AmeriCorps program that will support the engagement of young people in our community. With the increase of cooperation with our most vulnerable population, youth, we can decrease crime.

Keith Wright:

Forest Park is wonderful place. It drew me and my wife to our current home. I go there every week, and I see the thousands of other people that go there as well. Whether it is for a respite from the urban landscape, sporting events, or gatherings with friends and loved ones, I often feel that a walk through the park is a walk through the wonderful diversity and energy that makes our city special. I do not take concerns for an increase in the safety of park visitors lightly, for my wife and I use this valuable resource often. If elected, I will sit down with Sector H police officers to learn about what is being done to address this issue and what we can do as a citizenry to address any problems that this meeting uncovers.

Q8. The library branches across the city are only open on a part time basis, which means that children have use of the library's resources only some of the time. Residents who depend on the library branches to get on the internet have limited access. What steps will you take as a city councilor to increase hours at the branch libraries?

Answers:

Keith Wright:

I have been a beneficiary of the public library system for as long as I can remember. As a teacher, I constantly encourage my students to read, read, and read. I believe that reading was one of the most important influences in my life. When I was a child, my family could not afford to buy as many books as I could read in a year.

Consequently, the library system was the key to my development, as it is today for many of our city's residents, both young and old. I would like to promise that I will work upon my election to increase the hours of the library. However, I know that we are in the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression. These are extraordinary times for city and state leaders, for while the federal government can borrow trillions of dollars, the state and city must live within its means. Tax revenues are down, and the city is bracing for cuts in local aid. As long as this bleak budgetary outlook remains, my hope is that we can pass a balanced budget that protects our libraries at their current levels. My long-term hope is that as the economy improves and our budgetary woes ease that we can restore the devastating cuts that have taken

Forest Park Civic Association
Questionnaire
Ward 6 - City Council Candidates

place in the past year. I also will be quite vocal if our library system's accreditation is threatened due to a lack of funding, and am certainly open to ideas that would help to improve this important resource.

Amaad Rivera:

As stated earlier, by bringing people together we can address these issues. A strong volunteer program, supported by AmeriCorps funds has the ability to engage volunteers of all ages to help contribute to betterment our community while receiving a stipend. By utilizing these resources, I believe that we can expand library hours as well as develop program that will engage people from all background. As the only campaign to engage youth and speak directly about our libraries, it important to model the type of leadership that is essential to the progress Springfield needs.

Q9. What steps would you take to help revitalize the X-Main Street Corporation and make the 'X' a more pedestrian friendly neighborhood shopping area?

Answers:

Amaad Rivera:

Community Development Corporations are important part of building community and ensuring economic development. I support the develop and arguably redevelopment of a Community Development Corporation to help amplify the voices of residents in the economic planning our neighborhood.

With limited funding, I believe that we should support the development our central business area in Downtown Springfield. It is important to build a safe space in which residents and visitors alike can enjoy restaurants, entertainment and recreation. It is also important to help support locally owned business especially in our downtown area. As a side note, the development of our downtown area was a specific recommendation by the Urban Land Institute report (2007).

Keith Wright:

The X has a long and varied history, from being an intersection of trolley lines to its current configuration as a major thoroughfare for thousands of city and regional residents. The X-Main Street Corporation has played an important role in recent history as it provided the major thrust behind the restoration of The Bing Arts Center. As a Ward 6 City Councilor, I pledge to work with The Bing, the Office of Planning and Economic Development, and concerned citizens to help increase the vibrancy of my neighborhood.

Q10. There have been a number of break-ins in the Forest Park area of both homes and automobiles and there is some concern about police response. Education of residents on good crime prevention techniques has been extremely limited, and the community police aspect of policing appears to have dropped off significantly. Yes, there are still beat management team meetings on a monthly basis, but the beat cop, is less present and communication between the police and residents has decreased. What will you do as a City Councilor to change this for the better?

Answers:

Keith Wright:

For the past several months I have responded to city-generated phone calls about Sector H meetings. These meetings, held once a month, are designed to increase communication between the police and the community it has sworn to protect. I have seen how these meetings are beneficial to our neighborhood. I have seen citizens empowered to address law-breaking neighbors through the courts. I have seen citizens give information to the police who have then been able to then put pressure on people who have not been doing the right thing. Perhaps most importantly, I have seen recognition by residents that keeping a community safe is the responsibility of the entire city—the police cannot do it alone. With that said, I believe that communication between the police and the rest of the community is important. I invite dialogue around how to make our city safer, and have begun to research how other communities are tackling crime and safety. The issue is complex, and there is no quick fix. I applaud the brave officers who are working hard to tackle the public safety issues that affect our community.

*Forest Park Civic Association
Questionnaire
Ward 6 - City Council Candidates*

Amaad Rivera:

Bringing communities together to build mutually beneficially relationship is something I have been doing both personally and professionally my entire life. I look to support a stronger beat based community policing program, as well as build stronger lines of community between the entire community of Forest Park. Taking leadership to bring our community together is an important aspect of being a city councilor, something I have demonstrated with my win in the preliminary election with a broad base of support from all over Forest Park.