

2010 QUESTIONNAIRE FOR CANDIDATES FOR ELECTION COMMISSIONER

Instructions to Candidates: The following questionnaire will be used to evaluate candidates for the office of Democratic Election Commissioner. Please answer each question so that we can compare the answers of each candidate and so that you can give the Cambridge Democratic City Committee a full and fair picture of your qualifications and ideas for the position. Responses should be in a form suitable for reproduction, in single-spaced format. Responses must be received by Secretary Mellissa Knowles by 5:00 p.m. on Monday, February 1, 2010. Ms. Knowles's email address is mellissanne@gmail.com.

1. State your name, residential address, business address, telephone number(s), and e-mail address.

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2. **Personal.** Give a brief biographical summary, including your occupation and past activity in the Democratic Party, community, Cambridge politics, and voter registration. Please include your experience with proportional representation, Cambridge election procedures, and the election laws, if any. Attach a resume if available. Is there, or do you anticipate, anything (time, other commitments) that would present a conflict of interest or otherwise make it difficult to fulfill your duties as Election Commissioner for the full four-year term?

I was born and raised in Brookline, Massachusetts and, after attending Boston University School of Fine and Applied Arts, I had a short, undistinguished career as a lyric soprano with the Goldovsky Opera Theatre in New York and any other opera company that would hire me. I spent several years working for Random House and Harvard University Press. I moved to Cambridge from New York in 1969 and have never left. I love Cambridge and felt it was home from the moment I arrived.

My son was born with a severe communications disorder and I discovered that there were few services available for families like mine. I founded a respite care and family support agency, Temporary Care Services Inc. and was its first Executive Director. It continues to serve families in the Cambridge/Somerville area, including mine.

I have been a Democrat for all of my voting life. I became involved in political campaigns on the municipal level within a year of moving to Cambridge and have been active ever since.

In my ideal world the United States would have Universal Voter Registration: when a citizen reaches voting age, they are automatically registered to vote at their address. Until that day comes, I participate in voter registration drives and have always done so. I believe that the single most important activity of citizenship is voting.

I am enchanted by, and heartily support Proportional Representation (PR). In preparation for my earlier campaign for Election Commissioner, I researched the many variations of PR used in other municipalities and countries, and became quite knowledgeable. While Commissioner, I have taken courses in election law at Massachusetts Continuing Legal Education (MCLE) and have taken advantage of every opportunity to enhance my knowledge.

I have served as Election Commissioner since August 2007 when I was appointed to serve out Gerry McDonough's term. I have no conflicts that would impede exercising my responsibilities as Election Commissioner.

My resume is attached.

3. **Reason for Seeking Office.** Please explain why you are seeking the office of Election Commissioner.

I have found my time as an Election Commissioner to be among the most gratifying I have ever spent. Being a champion for the voter—ensuring the experience of voting is satisfying; the process of voting clear and friendly; accessibility of the polling places is comfortable; and the personnel in the office and at the polling location is competent—has been a driving force. I wish to continue because I feel confident I have the talents, insight, and experience to contribute to the improvement of the system.

4. **Voter Participation (registration and turnout).**

- a. **Increasing participation.** Given the dynamic nature of the City of Cambridge, with a highly transient population, how do you propose to increase the number of people who register and vote across elections for different offices? Do you have any specific suggestions for increasing participation?

During the Presidential election year we found increasing registration to be quite easy—more than 10,000 more voters were added to the rolls during that time. Clearly, providing candidates who ignite enthusiasm and pitting them against candidates with questionable competence serves to promote voter registration without too much difficulty.

The real difficulty in increasing registration is to make the registration process easier during more ordinary times. I favor universal registration, even as I see the very real difficulties in implementing it. Absent that, I favor Same Day Registration as a stop-gap measure.

I also found, however, that at registration events, we need to do more than simply set-up a table. We need to approach and encourage potential voters. At the high school events we hold, for example, I always come prepared with Absentee Ballot applications for seniors who are going away to college.

Our reminder signs are useful, but we tend to keep them only near polling places, in front of City Hall, in the traffic triangle in Harvard Square, and in a couple of other locations. I would like to increase the number so that people see them along major thoroughfares and in public squares and are reminded to register and vote.

- b. **Location & Boundaries.** Do you favor keeping the current model of eleven wards with three precincts apiece when lines are redrawn after the 2010 census? Or would you favor more or fewer precincts or polling places? Are there particular boundaries that should be redrawn during re-precincting? Or polling places that should be relocated?

The number of Wards is not really as critical as the number of precincts. Rather than fewer I wish there were more since, in some areas of the city, many older or disabled voters have a lengthy trek to the polling place. Not all polling places are easily accessible by public transportation from throughout the precinct. Having smaller precincts (i.e. more of them) would make it easier for voters to get to the polls.

Our present boundaries make a certain amount of sense as they are, but the location of polling places doesn't always. Having polling places near the center of each precinct, in a location where parking is ample, public transportation is direct, and sidewalks and streets are always passable is ideal. This is Cambridge, however, and that isn't as easy

as it sounds. We have few public buildings in some areas and what does exist doesn't always match current law for accessibility.

- c. **Information.** Do you have any proposals for improving the existing voter education program? Do you support or oppose proposals requiring the posting of the MA Voters Bill of Rights in every polling place? Do you support or oppose proposals that would allow Cambridge voters to check their registration status online, as Boston voters may?

To improve election worker education, I created a script and directed the production of a training video for poll workers. I hope to do the same for voters to be posted online and am in the process of working on the various scripts to cover primary voting, general election voting, and PR voting. As well, I hope to create an animated film showing the process of PR counting so that newcomers to the city may view it online or at the office.

Cambridge posts the Voters Bill of Rights in every polling place and I heartily support and approve of it. Additionally, we post the wording of the 150 foot rule so that partisan poll workers have clear information of where they can and cannot stand and interact with the voting public.

I would favor some sort of way to **search for registration status online**, but am mindful that some see online voter information as violation of their right to privacy. Voting lists *are* public records but before implementing any such system, a long public process should happen to ensure that all points of view in this critical area of privacy be understood and, to the extent possible, be addressed.

5. **Accuracy of Voter Lists.** Do you think that the existing system is adequate to minimize voter list inaccuracies (e.g., erroneously dropping voters, or carrying nonresidents on the voter lists)? Do you have an opinion on the current policy regarding inactive voters? Do you have any improvements to propose? Would you propose any changes to the yearly city census?

There are relatively few inaccuracies on voter lists. During an election last year, for example, our Clerks were asked to keep track, by name, of everyone who protested that they were improperly listed as inactive because of failure to return the census. We then searched the census records to attempt to locate them. Although many said they had returned the census, we could not find any of that group that did. Looking over census returns for several years, we saw a pattern of non-returns for these voters. Even so, the number of inactive voters that turn up to vote in any precinct, or even across the entire city, is quite small. That said, a bit fewer than 20% of registered voters in Cambridge are inactive. They don't return the census and they don't vote regularly.

The policy on inactive voters is federal and state law, so unless those laws change we are limited in what changes we can make. Because Cambridge has such a heavy resident turnover, we are always scrambling to keep our lists accurate.

The wording of the instructions on the city census could be clearer, and I'd prefer a slightly different graphic design to make finding information easier. The information we seek is set by law, but we can certainly use the forms to provide additional voter information.

6. **Election Commission Staff.** What is the proper balance between the commissioners and the staff? How will you hire and evaluate the Commission's executive director? What actions, if any, should be taken to limit turnover at the Commission? How will you work with the Commission's staff? Do you have any basic principles you follow when hiring and managing staff?

Election Commission staff—those that work in the office on a daily basis report to the Executive Director. During elections, when Commissioners are hiring workers for the Polls, our interactions with staff members who are facilitating that hiring is greater, but it is the Commissioner's job, not the staff person's, to contact potential workers, train them, and ensure that they get in the necessary paperwork for employment.

Hiring the Executive Director is in process as I write this. There will be a committee made up of Commissioners and other city department heads who interact with the Executive Director to interview the candidates. There will be three rounds: the first to interview those who meet the general qualifications, the second to interview a smaller sub-set of that group, and the third with the City Manager who will make the final choice. I am specifically looking for someone with experience in elections and in managing an enterprise as detail-oriented and stressful as elections are. The person should be comfortable with giving direction and open to revising existing systems to make elections and the details of managing election days smoother and more transparent. The individual should have solid interpersonal skills and view elections as the cornerstone of a democratic society.

Limiting turnover at the Commission is accomplished by providing a welcoming work environment. The staff, however, is extremely stable. Most have been with the Commission for years. During the weeks leading up to elections we often hire additional people, but they are frequently the *same* people election after election. My interactions with Commission staff are always respectful. The individuals were hired for specific jobs and I don't wish to intrude unless what I need falls within their job description. I am comfortable, however, with all of them and find that my requirements mesh smoothly with their work.

We in the Cambridge Democratic City Committee certainly can all further limit Commission turnover by voting for me to continue as Commissioner, and I would be honored if the City Committee does so.

Since Commissioners don't **hire or manage staff**, other than workers on election day, I will limit my response to those individuals. I want the people voters encounter on election day to be well-trained, cheerful, respectful, knowledgeable, and glad to be a part of the electoral process. They must conduct themselves with strict neutrality. Their singular focus should be the voter and ensuring that that voice is heard. They must not only know the details of their job, but must be able to respond accurately to voter questions and concerns. Those who cannot meet those standards should not be hired.

7. **Election Commission Budget.** What comments or changes, if any, would you suggest for the Election Commission's budget, in order to make the commission more cost-effective? What experience do you have administering and managing budgets?

I have felt few 'pinches' because of budget limitations. The initial budget each is predicated on the standard number of elections scheduled for any given year, yet in the past three years that I have been with the Commission, there have been 2 vacancy recounts, one School Committee election recount, and eleven elections, four of which were special elections to fill vacancies. The cost of a vacancy recount is small, but not

insignificant. The full recount of the School Committee election was very expensive, as are special elections, which require additional, usually unexpected expenditures. I would like to undertake a review, however, of the cost of the systems we now employ with an eye toward limiting the amount of disposable material we use.

In the years to come I believe that many paper-based systems will give way to electronic systems. Such a change must be constructed carefully to ensure that strict protections of data occurs. I will always, however, favor paper ballots. They provide as fine an indication of voter intent as there is. No electronic system that I have reviewed, including those that, supposedly, produce a paper trail, are as secure. We don't, however, need the same level of care for other documents. At each election we produce reams of special documents to have on hand at polling locations. While some are used, many, at the end of the day, remain unused and are recycled.

I want to undertake an examination of alternative ways of securing the documentation we require in special circumstances without using nearly as much paper to achieve it. To this end, I would like there to be a laptop in every precinct loaded with the City's voter list (to assist voters who are unsure of where they vote or who believe themselves to be registered but are not listed on the precinct voter list), the various voter forms necessary to conduct the election which can be filled-out on the computer and then printed out on a small portable printer.

8. ***Operation of the Election Commission.*** Do you have any comments on, or changes to propose, in the day-to-day administration of the Commission? Has the commission been appropriately responsive to candidates, political parties, and interest groups that request or require its services? If not, what changes do you propose? Do you favor having evening meeting and hearings of the election commission? How would you evaluate the Commission's training of election workers? How important is it to you that election day workers live in the communities where they serve?

For much of the year the **day to day work** of the Commission is processing data from the census, voter turnover: people moving into or out of the city, changing addresses within the city, and the like. The commission is required to administer the Ethics Ordinance which would be smoother if people who are required to submit their data did so in a timely manner.

During election season, however, the pitch of the place moves into high gear. I am impressed with how smooth, effective, and responsive it is. There could be some tweaking—that's true of any workplace—but there are no systemic problems. Having said that, a new Executive Director should feel free to modify and change the present set of systems if he/she sees ways they can be improved.

For the most part, I believe the Commission is **appropriately responsive to candidates, political parties, and interest groups**. It happens, from time to time, that some individuals request services that cannot lawfully be provided. I am sure that sometimes requests that are proper are not responded to speedily. Where we fail in that area, we need to be informed so whatever led to the problem is corrected.

I do favor **evening meetings**, but am mindful that that would require the presence of Commission staff, adding to their workday. The office is open until 8:00 p.m. on Monday, but since City Council meets on Monday, taking advantage of the presence of staff on that day to hold meetings is impractical. The timing of the few hearings we have are mostly dictated by state law. Usually, however, when we have more flexibility in scheduling, we attach hearings to regular meetings. Prior to the Municipal Election, we held several hearings for the benefit of candidates who were concerned about the write-in procedures.

Because of several lapses in following procedures at the polls, I proposed a complete overhaul of our **poll worker training procedures** this past year in the hopes of making the training more informative, effective, and consistent. The Commission has yet fully to review the proposal, but I will persevere. Although we have a fairly good Manual, it's graphic design is poor and needs revamping. There is no set curriculum for the training sessions which I want to rectify. Many other states around the country have taken important steps toward making these improvements. I hope Cambridge will join their ranks.

To make things work more smoothly at the polls, I designed Quick Reference Guides for our workers' use. They have proved invaluable in ensuring procedures are followed accurately. I believe that making the Manual more readable, is critical as well and will lead to greater accuracy.

While it is desirable to have most of **the workers in any polling location residents of the precincts they serve**, it doesn't necessarily follow that they are the best workers. My interest in staffing the polls is that we hire people who understand and follow election law, who know and understand the the procedures of the job they have been hired to do, and who work efficiently and effectively, while being friendly and service-oriented toward voters. Poll-worker competence is linked to voter confidence, as several recent studies have shown. This is especially true when voters have questions. A worker who is able to reply cleanly and correctly gives voters a confident sense that the polling place is organized and follows procedures correctly.

9. ***Election Day Procedures.*** How can the Commission avoid problems at polling places on Election Day? What role should the Commissioners play in insuring a trouble-free Election Day? Do you favor the continued use of optical scan voting devises in Cambridge elections? How would you evaluate the way in which the proportional representation "count" was done in November 2009?

The best way **to avoid problems at polling places on election day** is to have well-trained workers. There is no way to avoid problems beyond our control, such as the time one precinct found, embedded in a packet of Cambridge ballots, fifteen or twenty ballots for Holliston rather than for Cambridge. The problem of incomplete voter lists, however, was something that more rigorous procedures could have caught.

Commissioners have a responsibility to make sure that workers follow both the law and the procedures designed to insure that election day is trouble-free. I often supplement the full training with additional time with my workers. If someone cannot attend the scheduled training sessions, I hold special training sessions for them (and workers from other precincts I don't manage) to make sure they know what they are doing.

I do favor the use of optical scanners. Hand counting is the only realistic alternative and that has its own set of limitations and problems. I think the recent recount of the School Committee election demonstrated how well the scanners actually work. The only difference between the scanned count and the hand recount were a trivial number of votes. I understand that some people feel that, since there are programmed cards used to count the ballots, there is room for mischief. In the hands of truly corrupt people that might be true, but there are safeguards we employ to thwart that possibility. For example, every scanner is fed a set of fifty ballots prior to certifying the memory card as error free to ensure that it reads them properly. The memory card is then sealed with a seal that can only be removed by breaking it. The scanners are, from then on, kept under seal until election day and are delivered to and taken from the polling places by police officers.

The Proportional Representation count took longer this year because of the volume of sticker/write-in ballots. Hand-counting those took a full day and a half. When hand counting is necessary, brevity is impossible, but the procedures worked extremely well, thanks, in part to good planning.

The PR vote this year had a review of sorts in the hand recount of the School Committee ballots. There was no substantial difference between the count, the re-distribution of ballots, or the numerical outcome. Quota, for example, was exactly the same, and the individual candidate counts were substantially the same. Choice Plus Pro, the software designed for the count, works very well. It probably isn't perfect, but since the recount I have been more impressed with its capabilities.

10. **Recount Procedures.** What is your evaluation of the recount procedures of the Commission? How did the commission handle the 2009 School Committee recount? What changes, if any, would you suggest? What standards would you use in deciphering disputed ballots?

The recount procedures were the subject of considerable discussion prior to the actual event. Citizens and candidates had an opportunity to contribute their experiences and insights, many of which were helpful. This was the first recount in a municipal election since the introduction of electronic counting. The experienced hands who did The Count year after year were a decade out of experience. We also were simultaneously trying to conduct a special election in the midst of the recount, which added a certain degree of stress.

The recount, however, went very well and was quicker than we expected. I would have preferred to have a display board which outlined the procedures for the candidates and the public, and gave everyone a sense of where in the procedure we were. If we have another recount that is one of the changes I would recommend, along with information sheets about the process, sample replica ballots, and tallying procedures.

There is a notion that deciphering unusual ballots is complicated. And there is the thought that any unusual ballot is also a disputed ballot. Usually it is not as complicated as people think, nor are such ballots disputed as frequently as supposed.

The only **standard for deciphering disputed ballots** is discerning voter intent. While it seems uncomplicated to decide in advance how a particular ballot should be interpreted, in fact the very reason for the dispute is that voter intent is *not* clear.

In this past municipal election people worried about how Commissioners would interpret a ballot to which a sticker had been attached but no oval filled in. That never actually came up because if a voter tried to cast such a ballot, the scanner would reject it as a BLANK. The voter would be told that the ballot was being read as blank and given to opportunity to mark it or spoil the ballot and make out a new one. In PR elections there are always a smattering of ballots with a set of ovals filled in under same ranking. There is no way to discern vote intent on these ballots.

We also get a fair share of ballots where people have circled the ranking rather than filling in the oval, or the numeric ranking is not with ovals filled in, but with numerals next to the names of candidates of choice. Voter intent is really clear in these circumstances though the ballot may have been rejected by the scanner. Commissioners agree so readily on almost all of the unusual ballots, that it's fair to say voter intent is clear. Where it isn't, disputes do arise, but often, even then, the vote is 3 to 1 among the Commissioners.

11. **Ballot Design.** What is your opinion regarding the format of the ballot used for city council and school committee elections? Do you think the instructions provided to voters are clear and that the ballot is easy to read and complete? What improvements, if any, would you suggest?

The instructions are clear to people familiar with PR, but not for those who aren't. They could be made considerably better by using shorter sentences, sequential examples, and greater clarity concerning write-ins and stickers. While I think there is real room for improvement in regular election ballot design (having the oval to the *left* of the name, rather than to the right, for example, and using upper and lower case as opposed to just upper case), PR ballots pose a different set of problems. When there are twenty or more candidates, the ballot is cumbersome and difficult to track visually. Those voters who wish to vote for twenty different people get lost in a maze of their own marks. A significant number of the ballots with over votes in the last two municipal elections were those where the voter gave a vote to nearly every candidate.

A real problem with PR ballots could be that too many people go into the voting booth without a clear idea of how to fill out them out. We have many, many new voters every two years and too many have no idea how the system works. Years ago the Chronicle gave extensive information, but sadly, there is not only far less coverage given to our election, but some of the information is incorrect—such as the statement when Decker announced her sticker campaign that only number one votes for her would count and that ballots with her write-in as numbers two and on would be exhausted. Write-in ballots, of course, are treated in exactly the same way as ballots with a candidate's name printed.

To rectify this I propose several options. First, prior to the election, a pamphlet should be sent to all voters giving clear instructions on how PR works and how to cast votes. The web site should not only contain extensive information about PR voting, but an animated video of the counting procedure should be available. There should be public meetings held in libraries and community centers explaining the system.

12. **Voting Rights.** Do you favor voting rights for legal immigrants in municipal elections? Do you favor lowering the voting age in municipal elections? Do you favor same-day voter registration? Do you favor requiring all (or any) voters to show a photo ID before they vote? What special problems or opportunities would each such change cause for the Election Commission?

I would be delighted to have legal immigrants vote in municipal elections. I would have no objection to lowering the voting age for municipal elections. I have supported same-day voter registration, but prefer universal voter registration. On a busy election day, helping new registrants fill out the form, giving them the oath, and ensuring they are at the right polling place to vote, complicates the task of election workers. Universal registration by-passes all of that.

Regarding **photo IDs:** I always wonder what problem a solution such as everyone bringing a photo ID to the polls will solve. Voter fraud is miniscule. So what is served by adding this to the procedure to vote? It means still more training will be necessary, more forms created, more delay in getting a ballot, more disputes—and all this to solve a problem that doesn't really exist!

By law, anyone who registers by mail must show an ID. That is pretty cumbersome by itself, as it turns out. So, no, I don't favor IDs of any kind for most voters. For a whole segment of the population acquiring photo IDs would impose a heavy burden. In

addition, most photo IDs provide more information than picture, name and address—information election workers have no right to see.

13. **Miscellaneous.** Do you have any other suggestions for carrying out the powers and duties of an Election Commissioner? Is there anything else you would like the Cambridge Democratic City Committee to consider in evaluating your candidacy for the office of Election Commissioner?

I have been honored to serve as an Election Commissioner and enthusiastic about the possibilities for improving the system for voters. With a new Executive Director, the opportunity is present for a review of some of our systems with the aim of making them more user-friendly and reliable. I have introduced innovations that have cut down of errors and improved voter experience. I have a strong dedication to implementing progressive systems:

- Universal voter registration, or, at least, Same Day Registration
- Pre-registration for 16 & 17 year olds
- Giving the municipal vote to legal immigrants
- Improved election worker training and online additional training
- Transparency in our dealings with voters

My hope is that members of the City Committee will review the work I have done as Commissioner and find it exceeds their expectations. I want the honor of continuing that work.