

Citizens Union Candidate Questionnaire
New York City Council
Election 2009

Candidate: Thomas E. Cooke Age: 38
Office to Which You Seek Election: Council District #19
Campaign Address: P.O. Box 604976; Bayside, NY 11360
Campaign Phone: (718) 425-0939 Fax: (718) 886-7445
Party Affiliation: Democrat Campaign Manager: Rob Giuffre
Website & Email: CookeForCouncil.com; CookeForCouncil@gmail.com
Education: Bachelor's Degree - Queens College; Master's Degree Sarah Lawrence College
Occupation: Retired U.S. Army
Previous Offices, Campaigns and Community/Civic Involvement: Campaign Manager for Nora Marino for State Senate, Member of Station Road Civic Association, Tutor for Troubled High School Students, Associate Member of AARP, Preserve New York, The 504 Democratic Club

Are you willing to be interviewed by CU's Local Candidates Committee? Yes

Have you completed requisite campaign finance fillings? Yes

Signature of Candidate: Tom Cooke Date: 7-22-09

I. Candidate Questions

VOTING AND ELECTIONS REFORM

1. I support allowing registered independents access to voting in party primary elections. In a city like New York, with such high reelection rates and dominance from one party, anything that might increase turnout in vital primary election is a positive. I would also support eliminating the one-year waiting period to vote in a primary election for people who switch parties.
2. I support allowing city council and/or public referenda to appear simultaneously as charter commission referenda because it would give more power to individual citizens and prevent the mayor from essentially killing referenda he deems unfavorable.
3. I support increasing pay for election day poll workers. If the pay were increased, the quality of the individual poll worker could increase. In addition, there has not been an increase for a long time and poll workers are past-due an inflation pay adjustment.
4. I support a complete overhaul of the New York City Board of Elections to eliminate waste, fraud, abuse and corruption. Ballot access in New York City is overly complicated and outdated, and I feel this is on purpose to prevent candidates like myself from ever having a realistic chance for success.
5. I support having an election administration system where there is a local elections executive director appointed by the mayor upon recommendation by a new board chosen by the mayor and the city council. Such a system will help ensure that the election process and ballot access procedures are unbiased and fair.

CAMPAIGN FINANCE REFORM

6. I support war chest restrictions. Elected officials should not be allowed to raise money under a different pretext than intended. For example, a member of the city council should not be allowed to raise money under the guise that they are running for borough president, then never go through with running for borough president and subsequently use that money to fund their reelection campaign or to distribute to other candidates for the purpose of building political capital.
7. I support the general concept of allowing campaign financing for ballot proposals but would need to hear more specific details – like qualifying threshold figures – before supporting such a program.

CITY COUNCIL REFORM

8. I support allowing Council committees to function more independently of the speaker by allowing chairs to hire staff directly, allowing hearings be scheduled by respective chairs, and allowing subpoena power by committee vote.

9. I support limiting councilmember's ability to earn outside income. The position of city council member is supposedly a part-time job, according to the city's technical definition. I believe the technical description should be changed to full-time, and part of the change should be that no other employment can simultaneously be held. Under the current situation, I support limiting stipends for leadership and chairmanships. If the rules were to change, and council members were no longer allowed to hold outside career interests, I would be more inclined to allow the stipends to continue.
10. I support requiring that any future increase in councilmember compensation not affect those serving in the current council term and only become applicable for the future terms. Lawmakers should not be able to issue raises to themselves.
11. I support consolidating the current City Council Committee structure and reducing the number of overall committees because reducing the number of committees would streamline the legislative process and reduce cost to taxpayers. It would also help curb the politics involved in chair positions.
12. I support a limit of two four-year terms. The public overwhelmingly supports term limits, and with state lawmakers enjoying such high reelection rates, it seems like term limits are needed more now than ever. As a general concept, I favor a citizen legislature, not a legislature run by career politicians.
13. I support modifying the City Charter to require that changes to term limits may only be approved by the voters.
14. I oppose the recent extension of term limits for the city's elected officials to three consecutive four-year terms. A public referendum should have been used to make the decision.

POLICY ISSUES OF IMPORTANCE

15. I support transferring disciplinary authority to the Civilian Complaint Review Board from the current system of internal regulation and discipline. You cannot reasonably expect fellow police officers to fairly preside over misconduct cases.
16. I support changing the current land use process under ULURP to increase the role of community-based planning. Currently, community boards do not have any powers other than non-binding recommendations. I would like to see community boards have more official authority.
17. I support a new Charter Revision Commission to review the roles of various offices of government. Specifically, the roles of the borough presidents and the office of public advocate. My only concern is the expense required to implement such a commission with looming budget gaps.
18. I support reforming the current pension structure by adding tiers for future city government employees. No politician wants to do something that will negatively impact the various service and trade unions, but hard decisions must be made by government due to recent economic hardship.

18-A

The City's pension and fringe benefits costs take up an unreasonable portion of its budget; these costs have more than tripled since the 90s and will continue to grow as life expectancy continues to increase and the population over 55 grows. While I believe everyone deserves a comfortable retirement, the current pension structure allows workers to retire much earlier than is necessary or prudent. With Americans not only living longer but also remaining healthier longer, it makes sense to increase the minimum retirement age. I generally support Governor Patterson's ideas for a fifth tier in the city's pension structure, which would include raising the retirement age for future employees to 62. Unfortunately Patterson's proposed legislation would not help with the current budget crisis because the savings would not be realized until new employees reached retirement; however it is a much needed step towards more responsible and practical budgeting.

19.

A - I support a constitutional convention and three issues I would like to see addressed would be: election law reform and election finance reform and implementing public financing for state elected offices, creating an independent auditor office to manage the state pension fund and independent, non-partisan redistricting of legislative districts.

B - I believe that greater home rule should be granted to the City of New York so the city can have greater authority on issues like mayoral control of schools, the MTA and bridge and tunnel tolls, and pension funding. New York City provides the lion's share of state revenue and should have greater authority on how that money is expended.

20.

The MTA provides essential services and I commend the Ravitch Commission's efforts to solve the MTA's budget crisis by spreading the burden over the largest group possible. I think the small tax on payrolls paid by employers in the 12 counties served by the MTA is necessary part of the solution. I think small automatic fare increases that adjust the price with the inflation rate every two years are fair and avoid future time-consuming debate; however large fare hikes, beyond the recent one put too much burden on the rider. I have some reservations about imposing tolls on East River commuters who are usually low-middle income workers living in areas with little public transit. Not only would these tolls target a group that can afford it least, but also the construction and maintenance of a tolling system is extremely expensive. Despite my minor reservations, I think state leaders should have taken Ravitch's recommendations more seriously and in a timelier manner. By taking less extensive measures, state leaders have left the MTA with a budget gap of about \$200 million, meaning it will have to cut some much needed services.

21.

I support the City Council having more resources to respond to the budget produced by the mayor. The speaker of the council should be provided more resources to hire financial experts for central staff.

22.

Every time an individual or entity is forced to use a significant percentage of available money to pay interest there is a loss in fiscal efficiency that literally reduces cash assets. I generally support reductions in debt and was glad to see the city reduce its long term risk by using surplus tax revenues to meet outstanding obligations. This year there were no surplus tax revenues. The situation in the question did not apply.

23.

Compared to other cities, New York has better public services and more public safety net options, but I do not think it is worth the money everyday workers pay out in the form of income taxes, user fees, utility bills, property taxes and more. In my personal opinion, I would rather a higher income tax rate for the city's most wealthy individuals over increased fees like subway fares, bridge tolls, parking violations, and water and utility bills. These expenses reduce the purchasing power of regular people, which reduces the profit margin for businesses, which causes job loss.

In addition, I would seek to eliminate waste, fraud, abuse and corruption from the city budget. Some ideas include: making the selection process of recipients of city contracts more open and accountable, dramatically reducing the operating budgets for the borough presidents offices, and curbing the pay and hiring of provisional employees within city agencies.

24.

Although the "green economy" has become a somewhat cliché phrase tossed around by every politician in the country, there is great opportunity in New York City. Providing homeowners and business owners greater incentives to make energy improvements would spur the construction and contracting industry. In addition, it would leave homeowners with more disposable income and business owners with more money for expansion by lowering energy bills. I would also like to see more public works projects funded by all levels of government. Those type of projects would put people back to work and spending money again.

In terms of lost revenue, city government must cut spending. Previously listed cuts would be where I would aim, but hard decisions are on the horizon.

25.

I propose adjusting the makeup of the Panel for Education Policy (PEP) so that mayoral appointees are in the minority and decision making authority is spread among a larger group of stakeholders – including parents and educators. Only when one entity (the Mayor's office) is removed from its position of dominance can other interest be treated respectfully. As long as mayoral control continues in its current form, parents and educators will be cast to the side when the Mayor deems it in his interest to do so.

Other changes I would like to see to the New York Public School System include a reintroduction of the popular "local district office system," a broadening of the curriculum that limits the practice of "teaching to the test" and streamlining the procedural process regarding unwanted teachers to that no aspect of the "rubber room" phenomenon remains significant. Additionally I would

replace teachers' salaries in principals' independent budgets with "teachers' position slots" that come out of the General Education Budget so that reassigning experienced teachers isn't a fiscal incentive for principals. I would also restructure the City's school grade system so that the predominance of year-to-year improvement no longer outweighs common sense.

26.

I would like to see the Board of Elections reform ballot access procedures. It is very hard for grassroots candidates to make it onto the ballot. The rules regarding general objections and specific objections are outdated and need to be changed. I would like to eliminate the concept of third party objections and leave full authority in the hands of the Board of Elections. In other words, instead of a candidate being forced to defend their petitions against other candidates and their attorneys, clerks at the Board of Elections would make the determination if the petitions are valid and in compliance of election law. Of course, this would require dramatic overhaul of Board of Election employees. I would end the entire practice of patronage positions at the Board of Elections and make all employees civil servants who must take an open competitive examination for job placement.

27.

I would support eliminating discretionary money from existence for one year. Like children, the city council has abused the privilege of discretionary funding. Ideally, I would like to eliminate all such pork spending, but understand that many local civic groups, programs and services rely on such funds. If the city could develop a way to keep funding to these groups stable but end the practice of discretionary spending, I would support a permanent ban. It is my belief that discretionary funding is nothing more than public campaign money, but again would not leave local groups high and dry of vital funding.

TOP FIVE 2009 CAMPAIGN PROMISES

- Propose reform of the Board of Elections so that the influence of party politics is greatly reduced and access to the ballot as a candidate is made extremely easy.
- Propose reform of the Department of Buildings so that developers who build out of code are hit immediately with stiff fines based on the severity of their infraction and their frequency.
- Outlaw the ability of Council members to hold any other jobs. One can't serve the public interest while pursuing a private interest and election to the City Council is the only venture that I am aware of that pays a six figure salary for a "part-time work."
- Fight to implement education reform that spreads authority to all stakeholders on a more balanced scale.

- Make special member items part of the overall budget so that the corruption and temptation of "slush funds" can be greatly reduced.