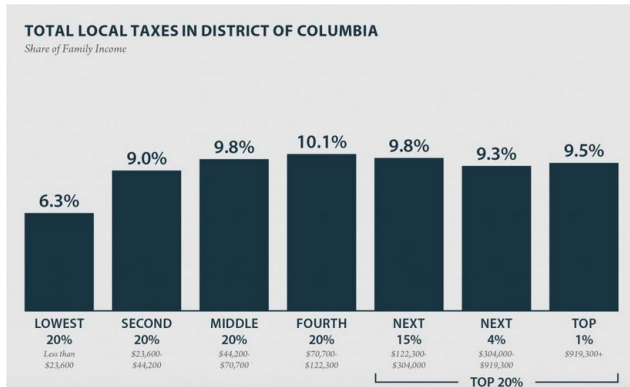


Mike Austin

DC for Democracy Questionnaire
Ward 8 Council - 2020 Democratic Primary

TAXATION



1. This chart (source: <https://itep.org/whopays/washington-dc/>) shows the current tax structure for DC households (including sales, property, and income taxes). Do you think this is a fair tax structure? If so, explain why. If not, explain why and how you would improve it.

The current tax structure is unfair because families that earn \$23,600 - \$44,200 pay nearly as much as those who make over \$900,000. That is unconscionable and inequitable for our residents -- especially, when the average household income in Ward 8 is \$35,000. This puts an unnecessary strain on the average Ward 8 family and creates a burden to make ends meet, and to keep the lights on for an average low-income family.

My approach would be one of equity: to have the wealthiest pay their fair share in taxes so that our residents who need to hold on to most of their paycheck, don't have the same tax burden as those with disposable income. In order to bring a creative, yet balanced approach, I would reexamine this tax structure to add additional brackets and retool who bears the brunt of the District's local tax base.

Finally, I would also research the appropriate maximum benefit for the Schedule H Tax Credit, which provides relief to both renters and homeowners, to ensure that families are provided the relief they need. I support the Mayor and Council's efforts to increase the benefit, as I worked to do the same when I was the Legislative Director for Councilmember LaRuby May. I wrote the *Displacement Prevention Act of 2016*, which caps property taxes and rents for our most vulnerable residents, to prevent displacement and preserve homeownership.

WORKERS' RIGHTS

2. DC has a proud history of passing landmark labor laws but a lackluster record of enforcing these laws or proactively informing workers about existing or new rights. What will you do as a CM to change this status quo and ensure there is strong oversight & enforcement of worker rights?

As a former Council staffer and current ANC Commissioner, I always hear how my constituents are tired of laws with no teeth, as well as the lack of opportunities in their communities. Ward 8 residents deserve leadership that moves with a sense of urgency to conduct thorough oversight and address unemployment, since we have the most unemployed residents in the District. District residents, particularly Ward 8 residents, need strong, high-wage workforce training programs, so they are ready for the demands of tomorrow.

I will also use my experience and the relationships I've developed as the Legislative Director for the Deputy Mayor for Greater Economic Opportunity, to have robust oversight that includes honest and transparent dialogue about an agency's enforcement issues. I'll be a champion for residents against wage theft, misclassification, and ensuring District residents get District jobs. The District's lack of enforcement is directly impacting residents, because whenever I drive by a construction site, I always see tags from other states; which shows that the District government either does not have the mechanisms to hold contractors accountable or that there should be additional voices on the Council monitoring the District's First Source Program.

Further, I will hold hearings, roundtables, and community meetings in Ward 8 so more residents know their rights and have the opportunity to ask questions and raise concerns. Ward 8 residents will also receive information about upcoming contracting and employment opportunities right in their community. I do not want residents to feel as if they must go to the Wilson building, like advocacy groups and lobbyists, in order to have their voices heard.

In addition, I plan to work closely with the Executive to monitor labor issues, among others, but more importantly, I will work closely with the Office of the Attorney General to give that office the tools they need to go after and hold bad actors accountable.

EDUCATION

3. Publicly funded charter schools do not have the same transparency requirements as traditional DCPS schools including disclosing salaries, records, or vendor contracts less

than \$100,000 nor are charter schools required to have open meetings. Charter advocates argue that they lack the budget to comply with FOIA requests while open government advocates and parents want more access to information. Do you believe charters should be subject to FOIA? How would you resolve these opposing stances on charter school transparency?

Yes, I believe public charter schools should be subject to FOIA, because they take public dollars and public dollars should come with transparency. Every District public school should operate with clarity and be accountable to the public that funds it. Our education resources are vital; the District has some of the highest education spending per student in the country, so the public deserves to know exactly how these dollars are spent. In addition, I believe that the public, particularly parents and guardians, should have access to information about a school, especially when there is an impact to student learning. I think that we can find a balance to ensure that public charter schools are subject to FOIA with charter school concerns of inadequate funding to undertake FOIA responsibilities.

HOUSING

4. DC4D has joined the Reclaim Rent Control coalition, which advocates for expanding rent control. Do you support their [platform](#) in its entirety? If not, explain where you differ. What other ideas would you propose to help residents who are negatively impacted by rising rents?

Rent Control plays a vital role in ensuring that we protect our residents from being priced out of the District. In Ward 8, I have seen too many families that are forced to leave the District because the cost of living is too high -- which hits close to home, because many of my family members have been priced out of the city.

I agree with the Reclaim Rent Control platform in its entirety, because it is a comprehensive, balanced rent control proposal that will ensure that our families are able stay in the District, and enjoy the prosperity that many have awaited since the era when DC was the murder capital. Ward 8 has the highest percentage of renters in District, so a comprehensive rent control bill will help expand housing options, and ensure that we are not bending to the whim of landlords and slumlords.

In addition, Ward 8 homeowners need a comprehensive approach to ensuring that property taxes don't skyrocket. I worked to protect homeowners with the *Displacement Prevention Act of 2016*, a bill I drafted to ensure that rents and property taxes remain reasonable for our most vulnerable residents in Ward 8. I believe that this bill coupled with a comprehensive rent control policy can help solidify housing costs, or at least get us moving in the right direction. It will take progressive, bold, and creative leadership to sufficiently improve Ward 8 -- the last frontier as Mayor Barry eloquently called us.

GOVERNMENT/ETHICS

5. Are you participating in Fair Elections? If not, why not? What other ideas would you propose to limit the influence of money in politics?

Yes, I am participating in the Fair Elections Program, so my decisions are solely based on what is best for Ward 8 residents. Money in politics can be reduced by prohibiting second jobs for councilmembers, stronger reporting requirements for constituent funds, and financial disclosures for people doing business with the District.

6. Do you support abolishing Constituent Service Funds and replacing them with appropriated funds to serve resident needs? If not, explain.

No, I do not support abolishing Constituent Services Funds, although I fully understand the frustration with ethical missteps that have occurred in the past. The only reason I support Constituent Services Funds is because Ward 8 residents, the ward with the highest poverty rate in DC, have substantial needs, and oftentimes need financial assistance with bills and basic necessities. Ward 8 families regularly face eviction, disconnected power, or other emergencies that require immediate action, particularly when funds are exhausted from other government agencies. Having served previously in the Ward 8 Council office and currently as a Ward 8 ANC Chairman, I understand the depth and frequency of our needs. Other ward and at-large council members do not nearly have the same volume of demands for assistance as the Ward 5, 7, and 8 council offices.

7. Will you commit to vote for Vote16DC?

Yes, I commit to vote in favor of Vote16DC. I meet Ward 8 students all the time who want to be engaged and who care about the issues that are often seen as “too mature” for their age group. In fact, many Ward 8 students carry adult responsibilities and are fully capable of grasping the issues that impact their livelihood. I don’t understand why the District does not encourage civic engagement at an earlier age, when roughly ten percent of Ward 8 residents voted in the last election. If young adults take voting seriously, maybe adults will too, and we can change the next generation of poor voter registration and turnout.

8. Since DC frequently has races with many candidates in which the winner gets far less than a majority of the votes, would you support implementing ranked choice voting or some other method to ensure some level of majority support?

Yes, I support ranked choice voting to ensure there is at least some level of majority support for a candidate. Ranked choice voting is an election determination method that better-aligns with the will of the people, particularly in a crowded field.

9. What role should the DC Council play during the Ballot initiative process?

The Council should not interfere with ballot initiatives. As a public servant, I must act with the best interests of my constituents, so if residents vote on an initiative, the Council should have no role in undermining the will of the people to make the best decision that impacts their own lives.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE

10. Do you support decriminalizing sex work? If not, explain how you would reduce the violence and exploitation currently suffered by these workers?

I support the *Community Safety and Health Amendment Act* with amendments. I absolutely believe that the District can do a much better job to improve the health and safety of sex workers. I support the overall legislative intent of the bill, but want to ensure that purchasing sex, pimping, pandering, and brothel owning remain prohibited. I support policies that erase prior convictions for sex work-related offenses to reduce barriers to employment. I also support efforts to stay engaged with sex workers and sex worker advocates to ensure their needs are met.

11. Do you support ending stop and frisk in DC?

Yes, I support the end of stop and frisk in DC. From my time as a youth, I have been stopped and frisked several times, and it wasn't until I was older that I truly understood the gravity of those police interactions. In fact, it wasn't until I was an attorney and understood the gamut of my rights, that I realized just how many troublesome police encounters are normalized for Black men in DC. Too many parents of color have to talk to their children about the "rules" when dealing with police, and it is rooted in fear and terror. Parents are forced to protect their children against the entities that are entrusted to protect and serve them.

As the next Ward 8 Councilmember, I will fight tirelessly so that our next generation of young Black children do not have to fear the police. The archaic approaches that have failed Black and Brown communities for years must end -- they've led to mass incarceration, distraught families, and a generation of returning citizens who struggle to reintegrate into society.

12. What public health policy ideas would you propose to reduce violence in DC?

I would require more police to have an understanding of the trauma that Black and Brown communities face, and the historical and psychological impact of hostile encounters with police. In Ward 8, our residents face severe trauma and many government program and service providers lack the trauma-informed training necessary to understand and empathize with the people in my community. Thus, I would require social service agencies, schools, and police to have trauma-informed training to provide the intensive wraparound services that the most vulnerable in Ward 8 so desperately need. I would also introduce legislation that requires curfew violations for minors to

result in a hot meal and a warm bed at a youth center, while waiting for their guardians to arrive, instead of experiencing the stress and anguish from sitting at the police station as a minor.

A lot of the crime in the city is perpetrated by our youth, so I would ensure that juveniles detained or arrested by police have access to mandatory time to speak with a trauma-informed therapist. Many youth commit crimes because they are crying out for help and dealing with having to make difficult adult decisions. As the Ward 8 Councilmember, I will introduce legislation to expand the Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement (ONSE) training so community members can be certified to provide trauma-informed guidance and care to troubled youth. I also want to establish a Youth Crime Reduction Council, one that is led by youth (the current one is adult-led), and monitored and facilitated by adults; so we know first-hand what changes need to occur to end the youth violence. I would also require that Metropolitan Police Department officers serve longer terms in underserved communities to build a stronger rapport with those residents. Currently, officers serve short stints in certain neighborhoods, so there is not enough time to build relationships and get to know the community they serve. I believe that with a deeper understanding of the trauma our communities face, coupled with other policies and innovative ideas, we can begin to move the needle on how we effectively address crime with a public health approach.

IMMIGRATION

13. Do you support legislation to prohibit the District from cooperating with federal immigration agencies, including by complying with detainer requests, absent a judicial warrant or order?

I fully support legislation to prohibit the District from cooperating with federal immigration agencies. Councilmember Allen recently introduced emergency legislation to strengthen the District's Sanctuary City protections. Once I am the Ward 8 Councilmember, I will support the permanent bill that will be introduced before the emergency legislation expires. I support limiting the District's cooperation with federal immigration authorities, in addition to ending any loopholes the federal government uses to detain immigrants in the city. Our immigrant community should not live in fear and constant worry - my goal is to ensure that immigrants have a sense of security so they can continue to make great contributions to our city.

ENVIRONMENT

14. Given Pepco's resistance to transitioning to clean renewable energy, do you think DC would benefit from municipally owned electricity? If not, why?

Yes, residents will benefit from municipally-owned electricity. First and foremost, I want to be able to work with Pepco to understand its resistance and craft a path forward

to clean, renewable energy. However, residents' growing concerns about interests of utility companies conflicting with their own does raise whether the District should step in. Specifically, municipally-owned electric options are more accountable to the residents, establish purchasing power, as well lower costs for residents because there is competition on the wholesale market. Finally, conservation increases as residents have a stake in the process. Nevertheless, given Pepco's resistance to transitioning to clean renewable energy, there should be a change to conserve power, lower rates for customers, and shift to renewable energy; and Ward 8 residents would benefit most from the lower costs and eventual financial profits.

15. What specific legislative initiatives will you introduce in Council Period 24 to protect DC from the effects of climate change?

My campaign slogan is "Now or Never" because I believe that there is no time to waste to address some of the city's most pressing challenges. Therefore, Council Period 24 is a pivotal time to protect DC from the effects of climate change. Council Period 24 marks 12 years from the date that we need to reduce greenhouse gases in half. Climate Change, and science for that matter, is real, and I appreciate the District's response with such ambitious clean energy bills.

In Council Period 24, I plan to incentivize clean energy with more tax breaks for landlords and developers who use greener buildings (those efficiently using energy and water, investing in state-of-the-art recycling systems, incorporating green spaces, and using more solar panels). I will also propose taxing carbon emissions which will accelerate our transition from carbon use; increasing bike lanes in Ward 8 so there are alternative methods of transportation that do not emit carbon; requiring Metro to have an entirely green fleet, which is mentioned in the District's Department of Energy and the Environment's 2025 Energy Action Plan; and strengthening and accelerating the *Sustainable Solid Waste Management Amendment Act of 2014* to aim for a zero-waste program by 2021.

I would also encourage more mini "pocket parks" in Ward 8 to absorb heat as the temperature rises (in general, Ward 8 does not have enough parks, recreation, or activated green space). And I support more solar panels in Ward 8, because we do not have enough, and there should be more outreach and financial assistance so that more residents understand the potential savings for themselves and benefits to the environment.

HEALTH

16. The DC Council passed the landmark "Birth to Three" legislation providing universal child care at subsidized rates; however, they failed to fully fund it. Would solutions would you propose to create sustainable funding for the program?

Birth-to-Three for All DC is positioned to be an early childhood education and health model for states across the country, which is why fully funding the legislation should be a top priority for the Mayor and the Council. This landmark legislation is especially important for Ward 8 students, because we have the worst educational outcomes in the District. It is apparent that we are not preparing our students for the demands of tomorrow because our schools are underfunded and as a result our embarrassing opportunity gap is not closing. Research proves that 85% of brain development occurs before the age of three; so we need to begin educating our students much earlier to stimulate and promote brain development.

As the Ward 8 Councilmember, I will work with the Mayor, my Council colleagues, research organizations, and policy experts to identify funds and create new revenue streams to ensure *Birth-to-Three for All DC* is fully funded. I would propose analyzing our current tax expenditures to identify waste and redirecting those funds, or creating a balanced tax increase for our wealthiest residents. This pivotal legislation has a large price tag and it is going to take innovative thinking and collaboration to get to full funding.

BACKGROUND

17. (*Challengers only*) As a first-year legislator, you won't be allowed to chair a committee but will be able to express preferences for which committees you will sit on. Which committee is your top preference and why?

As a freshman Councilmember, I would ask the Chairman to sit on: the Committee on Health, because I have a background in health policy and with the new hospital coming to Ward 8, I want to be heavily involved in the planning and oversight; the Committee on Labor and Workforce Development, because Ward 8 residents need jobs in our community, and being on this committee will allow more collaboration with the Executive to get programs and opportunities to my ward; the Committee on Business and Economic Development, because one of my policy priorities is responsible development with proactive leadership - Ward 8 is rapidly changing and many residents feel left behind; the Committee on Education, because Ward 8 has some of the poorest student performance in the city, with the highest achievement gap and lack of meaningful opportunities; and the Committee on Finance and Revenue, because as development steadily comes into Ward 8, I want to have a substantial voice in incentives for development projects.

18. Briefly explain what systems you have or would put in place to get feedback from your constituents on policy?

Public engagement and feedback makes or breaks legislative victories. As a former Council staffer, I understand the importance of working collaboratively to not only introduce legislation, but to successfully usher it throughout the entire legislative process. I would ensure that my team moves with a sense of urgency and understands

the importance of responsiveness and community input. I would hold office hours throughout Ward 8 to get feedback, concerns, and policy suggestions from residents and businesses, and I would take meetings with all groups, not just ones that are favorable to my positions. If we want to make the District a city for all, we have to work diligently to hear from everyone.