



Sunday, May 9, 2021

## Citizens Union 2021 Candidate Questionnaire - Borough President

Dear Candidate,

Congratulations on your decision to run for the office of borough president! Citizens Union appreciates your commitment to serve the public.

In the following pages, you will find questions regarding your positions on various reform issues and your plans for office. The form includes sections on functions of the borough president office, planning and capital budget, and community boards and appointments.

Responses to these questions will be one of several factors Citizens Union uses to evaluate candidates running for city offices, and to issue our preference for the June primary. Read more about the method, principles, and criteria of the candidate evaluation process [here](#).

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**If you wish to be considered, please submit the questionnaire by April 17 and no later than 48 before your interview.**

If you seek our support, we will also need to schedule an interview with you as part of the evaluation process.

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If you cannot complete the questionnaire in one sitting, you can click Save and Continue Later at the bottom of every page.

Once you submit the questionnaire, you will receive a confirmation email with a PDF file containing your responses. Citizens Union will not be able to see your answers unless you submit the form. We plan to make responses to this questionnaire public on our website, printed voters directory, and other appropriate venues (your contact information will not be published).

For any questions, please email [candidates@citizensunion.org](mailto:candidates@citizensunion.org)

We thank you very much for your response.

## GENERAL INFORMATION

### Your Info

#### Name

Jo Anne Simon

**Seeking office:**

Brooklyn Borough President

**In which primary**

Democratic

**Age**

68

**Education**

1) BA, Speech Pathology, Iona College 2) MA, Deaf Education, Gallaudet University 3) JD, Fordham University School of Law

**Occupation/Employer**

NYS Assemblymember

**Previous Offices, Campaigns and Community/Civic Involvement**

Candidate, NYC Council (CD-33) 2009; Democratic NYS Committeewoman and Democratic District Leader 2004-2014; Boerum Hill Association - President 1993-1999, Chair of Land Use and Transportation Committee 1909-2004; Chair Gowanus Expressway Community Coalition 1996-2001; Chair Gowanus Expressway Community Stakeholder Group 2001-2004; Member, Citizens Union Candidate Committee, 2002-2004; Member, Borough President Howard Golden's Downtown Brooklyn Traffic Calming, Gowanus Expressway, and Hoyt-Schermerhorn task forces.

**Website**

[www.simonforbrooklyn.com](http://www.simonforbrooklyn.com)

**Twitter**

<https://twitter.com/JoAnneSimonBK52>

**Facebook**

<https://www.facebook.com/JoAnneSimonForBrooklyn>

**Affirmations**

**Have you completed the required campaign finance filings?**

Yes

**Have you qualified to receive matching campaign finance funds from the CFB?**

Yes

**Are you willing to be interviewed by Citizens Union's Local Candidates Committee?**

Yes

(Please note: interviews are prerequisites for Citizens Union's endorsements)

**Signature**



## **THE OFFICE OF THE BOROUGH PRESIDENT**

**1. The role of borough presidents often changes depending on the office holder. How would you use the office of the borough president to impact city policies affecting the borough? What is the vision of your office?**

Besides the capital dollars and a bully pulpit, the BP can also have a strong public presence to help shape vision, policies, and program needs of the City. Any plan to help Brooklyn recover from the impacts of COVID-19 that could be effective needs to be the product of on-the-ground engagement with stakeholders, and I intend to make this type of engagement a central piece of my work as Borough President. We need to talk to impacted parties about their needs, and then advocate, organize, and fund accordingly. I intend to bring back the stakeholder task force approach of a former Borough President, with my own approach which is rooted in community engagement and empowerment.

I have worked with three borough presidents during my years as a community activist and as a legislator and we can learn from what worked. We need to blend the effective task forces of Howard Golden's tenure, with the boosterism of Marty Markowitz's tenure, with the serious look of Eric Adams' tenure. Brooklynites need inspiration and hope right now, but we also face difficult problems:

a lack of equity in healthcare, housing, transportation, education, street safety and the pervasive and destructive prevalence of gun violence. I come to this role steeped in community empowerment in a way no other Borough president in my experience has, with a history of accessibility in my current office that is without parallel.

**2. The city charter was recently amended to establish an independent, minimum budget for borough presidents. If elected, how will you utilize this new protected status to better serve your borough?**

Building Back Brooklyn Even Better. That will require on the ground engagement with communities, and strategically using capital funds to invest in infrastructure supportive of communities – like universal access to broadband. I employ a holistic, intersectional and intergenerational framework for land use, transportation, energy and economic decision-making, and would do so as Borough President. We must increase equity in transportation infrastructure (transit, bicycle, pedestrian street safety), and energy production and distribution. We must meet the climate crisis head on by moving our economy to 100% renewable energy.

As an experienced activist on progressive transportation and environmental projects, I have seen first-hand how the voice of the average person is rarely at the table on decisions that impact their lives. I want to change that. Because I was often one of those people sitting in an auditorium late at night trying to impact change - I will put the voice, the creativity, and the intelligence of the community at the forefront of the rebuilding from COVID-19 and re-imagining that Brooklyn now faces. The Borough President is in a unique position to build a coalition of Brooklynites that can guide and implement real change.

**3. The charter requires borough presidents to directly engage with city agencies through a borough service cabinet to coordinate service delivery and issues. Yet the nature, level, and quality of collaboration with agencies varies. How will you work with city agencies to ensure meaningful engagement?**

My background as a community activist working with Community Boards, DCP, DOT, and several other agencies, along with several years in state

government collaborating with state and local agencies has positioned me well for this role. My approach has always been to work in coalition, ensure integrity and transparency when collaborating, and to provide meaningful engagement and communication. Of paramount importance is establishing and maintaining relationships with staff in city agencies and with local community groups, Community Boards, and constituents.

**4. Do you support empowering borough presidents to require the appearance of borough commissioner of city agencies for the monthly interagency “cabinet” meetings led by the borough presidents?**

Yes

**5. Borough presidents can hold hearings on any matter of public interest and are charged with establishing a borough-wide complaint program to report public complaints to better service delivery by agencies. How would you use these powers and the position of the office to amplify the concerns of borough residents? What issues might you focus on to improve agency performance or draw public attention?**

I would first assess what is being done currently in connection with a complaint system, evaluate it and look to ensure it is efficient and effective in assisting Brooklynites in getting served by the relevant agencies. Once area I would focus on is the LINK system through which affordable housing is secured. There is no shortage of need and too few units. But it is also an opaque system, fraught with a lack of communication with the potential tenant. Another area of focus would be to improve the efficiency of how the Department of Education reimburses parents who have advanced the private school tuition for their children with disabilities. The DOE makes parents bring legal actions and while pending, refuses to pay the tuition that it knows the parent will be awarded – because the child attended the same school the previous year and this is the correct placement. A parent can wait 18 months or more for reimbursement of funds they laid out, often by borrowing and incurring interest fees. Another area is the timeliness of DEP response, as well as NYCHA's.

**6. The borough presidents have the authority to introduce legislation yet few borough presidents in recent years have exercised this authority. Would you utilize this power, and, if so, what legislation would you introduce?**

Yes. I will push to reform our current land use process, which is developer-driven, and not community-driven. A key factor here will be the environmental impact piece, and ensuring environmental, income and racial justice in new projects. I am working on a bill in this area, but expect to conduct a significant iterative process before proposing such legislation.

I would propose a bill to require those engaging in significant as-of-right development to give written notice to Borough Hall and the Community Board within which the proposed development is planned, and the other property owners within a 500 foot radius of the site, detailing the nature and extent of the project, so that the community is informed.

My other key policy will be to ensure that every child in Brooklyn will be able to read. Education is the great equalizer. Every child should be screened for possible reading disability and get the interventions they need before they fall behind. I also carry a bill, which the Assembly passed but the Senate has not yet taken up this year, to screen people who are incarcerated for dyslexia. Our educational system is not a level playing field – while dyslexia amongst the general population is around 20%, research shows that between 50% -75% of people who are incarcerated have reading disabilities; too often these disabilities go undiagnosed and/or unaddressed in communities of color. Literacy is a matter of social justice, and I am looking at possible legislation in this area. I carry several bills in this area in the Assembly.

I will also push for universal child care. Outside of vaccine unavailability, child care is the single greatest barrier to reopening the economy. We need big structural change, in other words, and that takes all levels of government responding to the needs of working families.

I would bring the weight of the office to advocate for - and perhaps draft legislation -to create an office of LGBTQ+ Affairs, similar to the Office of Immigrant Affairs. I would advocate for better data collection on LGBTQ+ individuals by the City which has not been following the law on this. Without demographic data, it will be harder to develop policy and resources.

I will also work to put an end to the 24 hour work day for too many of our home care workers.

## **PLANNING AND CAPITAL BUDGET**

**7. Developers argue ULURP should be streamlined while community groups and advocates believe more opportunities for input should be provided or that voting thresholds should be changed for application approval. The pandemic has cast further disruption to the process. What reforms to ULURP do you support?**

ULURP is a rezoning process, not a planning process, which is its fundamental flaw. It does not adequately engage communities or amplify their voices except in a limited way, and yet it has a major impact in their lives and their communities. In brief, ULURP looks like engagement, but wasn't actually meant to allow for true engagement, and that has become glaringly obvious to everyone. ULURP literally sets up the community to fight someone else's idea of what the area needs. That's backwards in my mind. To that end, we must ensure that communities are at the table planning for their community. While the charter provides for community based 197-a plans, it has rejected each one; communities stopped doing this work because the City made it futile. This needs to change. At this time, NYC does not really have a planning process. Instead it uses rezoning processes to shoehorn in developer proposals as if they represented planning; this does not offer enough engagement of local residents or hold projects and rezoning to be accountable to a long term plan for the districts, boroughs and the city as a whole. To actually look holistically at all aspects of city life including housing, transportation, education, health, job growth, public services and utility provision in a process that engages all community residents and stakeholders in dialog, utilizing statistical analysis interpreted for the public to formulate a long term plan every ten years is a positive step to provide an informative and responsive plan for our city.

So, I generally support this approach, but agree with Dr. Tom Angotti that this too could go awry, and I agree with the amendments he suggested in his recent article in City Limits. Those are:

-Make fully-funded community-based planning an

integral part of the comprehensive planning process.

-Establish a planning leadership that reflects the diversity of the population at both citywide and neighborhood levels by incorporating representatives from community, racial justice, and environmental justice organizations in the leadership of the planning process.

-Fully fund the city's 59 community boards to develop their own plans in close coordination with the citywide planning process.

-Make comprehensive planning an on-going process at all levels and not just a once-in-a-decade occurrence.

-Undertake a comprehensive revision of the Zoning Resolution with wide participation by communities, and revisions that guarantee zoning's consistency with comprehensive plans.

As BP, I would work to execute a fair and equitable process of engagement to have all voices heard in a

**8. The borough presidents make recommendations to the mayor on capital projects as part of the budget process. All of the boroughs combined additionally receive 5 percent of the appropriations in the mayor's capital budget divided between the boroughs based on formulas related to land size and population. What would be your priorities for capital projects in the borough?**

I will employ a holistic, intersectional and intergenerational framework for land use, transportation, energy and economic decision-making. I would ensure the strategic use of the significant capital dollars the Borough President has at her disposal to increase equity in transportation infrastructure (transit, bicycle, pedestrian), and energy production and distribution.

Another priority I have is wiring Brooklyn. I have advocated at the state level for digital infrastructure - broadband, websites, to be considered "capital" - freeing up the availability of such funds to nonprofits and cultural institutions, so they can qualify for assistance to develop and maintain the digital presence they need in today's world. I will work with government, communities, and local organizations to assess the need and engage with community and businesses to create a mechanism to bring reliable broadband throughout



the Borough equitably. We need look no further than the challenges in remote learning in our schools to see how profound a need this is, or to see the inability of many community members to access Zoom or other online services due to lack of funds for such services or unreliable service. Ensuring that our public schools receive the capital support that they need is a priority, as well. We also need to move toward public power - for too long New York has been under the thumb of privately-owned corporate utilities. I've been a vocal advocate calling out ConEd and National Grid for providing shoddy service and not investing sufficiently in transitioning from fossil fuels. There may be less room for capital dollars in this area, but I will use the power of the visibility of the position, and the ability to create strong task forces to work together to develop a plan in this area. I am also going to continue to pressure the federal government to provide additional relief and infrastructure support.

**9. If elected, would you post on your website all applications received by your office for capital and expense discretionary funds, as well as groups which ultimately received funding?**

Yes

## **COMMUNITY BOARDS AND APPOINTMENTS**

**10. Borough presidents are charged with establishing a planning office that, among other functions, provides training and technical assistance to community boards on land use issues. The recently formed Civic Engagement Commission is also tasked with providing professional assistance to community boards, in consultation and coordination with borough presidents. Using the planning resources available, how would you use the office to help community boards fulfill their charter mandated responsibilities to provide feedback on land use proposals, while enabling the boards to make decisions independent of the borough president's office?**

I would look to balance the real need for institutional memory and facility with the work of

community boards with a need to bring in fresh ideas with complementary skills and abilities in making appointments. The operations of several community boards have been greatly improved by new members with technical and communications skills, for example. As someone who has read through all the dense draft and final EISs and engaged in the flawed public input portion of ULURP, I would also appoint an independent technical advisor to work with the Community Boards who can answer technical questions on engineering, environmental impacts, waste and sewage treatment, and the affordable housing levels, etc. We did this with the Gowanus Expressway tunnel advocacy and it was of enormous value to the communities throughout western Brooklyn.

I am also committed to conducting more robust education to inform people about what CBs are and what they do. In my experience, few people even know that community boards exist. CBs have charter-mandated responsibilities; they are not neighborhood associations, and people often don't understand their role. We ask these volunteers to weigh in on complex land use and transportation projects that have significant community impacts - and we should provide them with better resources, training, and access to experts when needed. We can work to develop and improve the functioning of CBs by providing additional resources to permit them to engage more fully and meaningfully in their charter mandated functions. We have for too long tasked them with increasingly significant responsibilities with too few resources.

**11. Borough presidents are charged with making hundreds of appointments. What criteria would you use for appointments to positions appointed by the borough president (the Panel on Educational Policy, City Planning Commission, community boards, etc.)? What processes would you put in place for advertising open positions and recruiting qualified candidates that represent the diversity of New York City, and how would you assure that appointments represent the diversity of the borough's neighborhoods?**

I would bring together my Education transition team which will be made up of leading education advocates and task them with identifying three to

five names of people who understand school equity issues in terms of race, gender, financial resources, and disability rights. I would also look at the make-up of the PEP itself and see where a need is unmet. This is because I believe the PEP should be made up of members who have a comprehensive picture and complementary backgrounds, experience and skills. BP appointees are significantly outnumbered by mayoral appointees, but every PEP member can amplify issues during the public meetings and discuss issues with the other PEP members, so it is also important for the appointee to be confident and persuasive in expressing their message. Given the duties of the PEP (approving DOE contracts and school utilization rules, etc.), the appointees should be able to represent the needs of Brooklyn's schools.

Community boards must reflect the diversity of the community they serve and the guidelines and process of selection must reflect values centered in racial justice and equity. I am looking anew at the approach that Scott Stringer took when he was Borough President and will be modifying and updating it for the Brooklyn of today. I have worked with many community boards over the years and am familiar with issues that they face and their varying dynamics.

We also need to make a concerted effort to recruit people with diverse backgrounds instead of hoping that it happens - this can include engagement with organizations and companies who are led by and serve BIPOC, non-profits, religious groups, food programs, NYCHA, LGBTQ+ groups, organized labor, educators and youth programs.

**12. Do you support granting the borough presidents the ability to make an additional appointment to the Board of Standards and Appeals, who would only vote on matters affecting that borough?**

Yes

**13. Do you support establishing independent budgeting for community boards?**

Yes

## **MISCELLANEOUS**

**14. What experience have you had, if any, with**

**good government and reform issues? (e.g. voting and elections, campaign finance, ethics, police accountability, government transparency and oversight). If you've worked to advance these goals, we'd love to hear about it.**

I passed the major campaign finance reform bill in the state, which closed the Limited Liability Company (LLC) Loophole. New Yorkers deserve transparency and fairness in the electoral process and closing the notorious LLC loophole was an important step forward. This loophole allowed unchecked campaign contributions by treating LLCs as individuals instead of corporations, and allowed them to funnel millions of dollars into state elections with almost no transparency, diminishing the voices of average New Yorkers.

I was a prime co-sponsor of the bill to repeal Section 50-a of the NYS Civil Rights law which gave police a means to hide their records from disclosure even in litigation. Thankfully, that will no longer be the case and with increased transparency there will be increased attention to how policing is done and provide accountability.

I am currently a prime co-sponsor of the "less is more" bill (A.5576), which would eliminate re-incarceration for most technical parole violations, improve due process, and permit people under community supervision to earn a 30-day "earned time credits" reduction in their community supervision period for every 30-day period in which they do not violate a condition of supervision, thus incentivizing them to avoid technical violations, and further provides for speedy hearings for those violations that do occur. Currently over 700 people are reincarcerated at Rikers Island for such technical violations. This is manifestly unjust, a waste of public resources, a danger to their health and safety due to COVID, and a barrier to successful reentry into the labor market and community.

As a Democratic District Leader for 10 years, I stood up to Vito Lopez, when it was a tough time to be a reformer – so glad to see the energy being brought to these efforts today. We've come a long way from days when I had to fight for rules reform and co-chaired the rules committee, opening it up to people who were not District Leaders and spearheading the establishment of the Independent

Judicial Screening panel, which in addition to bringing rigor to the process, also increased the number of LGBTQ+ members and women serving on the panels that would evaluate who was qualified for County's endorsement.

I have helped overhaul our antiquated voting system and enacted significant voting reforms, from automatic voter registration, electronic voter registration, to no excuse absentee ballot voting, to reforms for changing or enrolling into parties, to recently re-enfranchising over 43,000 New Yorkers who are on parole.

I served as a member of the Citizens Union Candidate committee for about two years, 2002-2004, but stepped down when I became a district leader.

I am currently the Chair of the Assembly Committee on Ethics and Guidance.

**15. What are the top three campaign promises or goals, and what action will you take to achieve them if elected? Feel free to reference an answer above rather than restate it.**

First: Reforming and shaping key charter mandated roles of the Borough President in formal land use review procedures and community board appointments (including the resources provided to them) and strategic use of the significant capital dollars at the BP's disposal to improve and augment eco-friendly transportation infrastructure to improve street safety for pedestrians and bicyclists. Having led the effort to get the City's first traffic calming project off the ground, these are issues that are close to my heart and my experience.

Second: A local land use boondoggle started my civic activism in the early 1990s and the crises in how we plan -- or don't -- remains a passion of mine. We need to completely reset the table and put community in the driver's seat. My work leading the Hoyt Schermerhorn project is an example of community-led, affordable housing. I believe we have to stop tinkering with ULURP (which is not just flawed but fundamentally unfair to the community) and reliance on zoning as an answer to what should be comprehensive urban planning. Zoning is one tool, a rough one, and dramatically overused in NYC to the detriment of our communities; spurring gentrification and displacement of people of color and people with low incomes. I have worked with affordable housing developers to support approaches that prioritize more deeply affordable housing and more supportive housing - a model that we know works.

Third: I'm also going to ensure that we get serious about resiliency. Brooklyn has 30 miles of shoreline, including two navigable waterways that are designated Superfund sites - the Newtown Creek and the Gowanus Canal, which is particularly susceptible to storm surge. As the planet and seas warm, storms will continue to increase in frequency and ferocity and New York City will be increasingly vulnerable. A resilient coastline is key, and the City has rested on its laurels for too long.

**16. If you have not addressed this already, in what major ways would your priorities as borough president differ from the incumbent?**

A key difference is that I come to this role and to politics by way of my work as a community activist, which is fundamental to being a successful Borough President and to the role of the BP. I also have decades of experience fighting to improve people's lives through my work as a teacher, as a disability rights lawyer, and as a state legislator.

**What else would you like us to know about yourself?**

My entire career has been about lifting the voices and fighting for the rights of those who have been historically marginalized.

I am a longtime community activist, a disability rights attorney, a former teacher of deaf students, and progressive Assemblymember for 6 years. I am running to become the first ever female Brooklyn President. Not only is it time for a woman to lead Brooklyn, but I am a woman with substantial experience in the community, legal, and political arenas. I am a fierce advocate for Brooklyn and I

have never shied away from standing up to powerful interests or big developers. I am an extraordinarily accessible legislator, with a storefront office and frequently hosting public meet and greets.

I worked as an attorney in private practice and opened my own small law firm, concentrating on disability discrimination in standardized testing, higher education and employment. I was called upon to testify before the US Senate on amending the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 2008. I tried the landmark case of Bartlett v. New York State Board of Law Examiners.

I have had significant legislative victories against big industries and institutions that needed to change- a major gun violence prevention bill ("red flag" law or ERPO) currently being replicated across the country, the campaign finance reform bill to close the notorious LLC loophole, a gender neutral bill for firefighters and police officers, and an education equity bill for those with disabilities, and more.

Early in my legal career, I volunteered with GMHC to draft wills for people living with AIDS. So many young people in need of wills was heartbreaking, knowing that few could rely on their families to respect their wishes and even fewer would survive. The stigma associated with HIV/AIDS impacted everything. Many who survived the loss of a partner, but weren't on their lease, would then face eviction, even if - and with some landlords, especially if - they also had AIDS. I am proud to have secured the first succession rights to rent stabilized housing for a surviving partner.

My experiences also showed me the awesome impact that citizens and non-profits could have, and how often they were ahead of elected officials in what needed to be done to address certain issues. Massive food insecurity led to the creation of God's Love, We Deliver, one of the few organizations at the time fearlessly providing food to people living with HIV/AIDS. Thanks to relentless and innovative organizing by Act Up NY and others, and scientists, medical research finally was prioritized.

**Please feel free to attach any additional information such as resume, campaign brochures, or issues statements.**

Please review your answers by clicking PREVIEW ANSWERS below. You can submit the questionnaire at the bottom of the preview page by clicking SUBMIT.

Once you click SUBMIT, you will receive a confirmation email with a PDF file containing your responses. If you don't see the email, please check your spam box.

If you have any further questions, you may contact us at [candidates@citizensunion.org](mailto:candidates@citizensunion.org).