



Tuesday, May 4, 2021

Citizens Union 2021 Candidate Questionnaire - Comptroller

Dear Candidate,

Congratulations on your decision to run to be the next New York City Comptroller! Citizens Union appreciates your commitment to serve the public.

In the following pages, you will find open-ended questions regarding your positions on various reform issues and your plans for office. The form includes sections on the public pension funds, the comptroller's auditing powers, budget, fiscal oversight and the economy, and the comptroller's role and work realtions.

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 evalatuion process [here](#).

**

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public on our website, printed voters directory, and other appropriate venues (your contact information will not be published).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

We thank you very much for your response.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Your Info

Name

Zachary J. Iscol

Running in what primary

Democratic

Age

43

Education

Cornell University

Occupation/Employer

Entrepreneur/Nonprofit Founder/Executive

Previous Offices, Campaigns and Community/Civic Involvement

U.S. Marine Corps; Founding and leading the top service provider for veterans healthcare in the nation; Deputy Director for Javits Field Hospital during COVID-19 Pandemic leading the turnaround there.

Website

zachiscol.com

Twitter

@zachiscol

Facebook

<https://www.facebook.com/ZachIscol4NYC/>

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



PUBLIC PENSION FUNDS

1. How will you select managers to manage various parts of the pension plans?

Comptroller, I will seek to select the most qualified managers for the various roles. To achieve this, we must do away with the practice of the top, and highest paying, jobs being reserved largely for white males. The pensioners deserve to have their money managed by a more representative field and as Comptroller, I will expand the selection process and find managers who better reflect New York City employees. It has been repeatedly proven that organizations with a greater level of diversity vastly outperform more homogenous ones. As Comptroller, I will look to build a diverse coalition of managers who can maximize the rate of return for pensioners.

2. How would you work to reduce the appearance of or actual conflicts of interest that can arise from investment firms seeking pension business?

As Comptroller, I promise to be a steadfast advocate for transparency in the City government. Trust has broken down between New Yorkers and their local government and I believe that this is a direct result of an administration that has tried to hide its dealings rather than be honest with its citizens. As the overseer of the City's 5 pension funds, I will review all contracts with investment firms for real or perceived conflicts of interests. Should they arise, we will either terminate the contract or ask the vendor to remove said conflict of interest. Government is not an entity that people should be exploiting or making money off of, and I will therefore actively work to remove conflicts of interest and pledge to work closely with non-governmental entities (nonprofits, journalists, etc.) who bring to light new cases.

3. What would you do as comptroller to improve pension investment returns? How would you limit or reduce costs associated with pension

investment fees and consultants?

First and foremost, the Comptroller has to be more proficient in selecting investment firms. Large Wall Street firms and multinational banks often provide average to slightly-above-average returns while charging exorbitant fees. Instead of accepting the current situation, as Comptroller, I will actively seek out investment firms who have a higher historical rate of return balanced with more realistic investment and consulting fees. Although hiring large banks over boutique firms may be more convenient, the focus of the Comptroller's office needs to be gaining the greatest possible returns for pensioners, not convenience.

4. Comptroller Stringer pushed pension funds to begin divesting from the fossil fuel industry. Do you agree with that approach, and how do you propose to balance the need to maximize investment returns with the pressure to meet broader social responsibility goals?

There are certain pension funds that are wary of divesting from fossil fuels for, in my belief, financial rather than political reasons. Therefore, approaching this problem from a political rather than fiscal standpoint is likely to cause any argument for divestment to fall on deaf ears. Instead, as Comptroller, I will make the argument that investing in clean and renewable energies is a sound fiscal strategy. Green investments have been proven by top notch firms (i.e. BlackRock) to have a higher rate of return than investing in the fossil fuel industry. Furthermore, the future is in clean and renewable energy (as is evidenced by car companies switching to EVs) and the earlier that our pensions can get their money in, the greater the rewards will be when the tipping point for renewable energies is reached. Thus, approaching the issue from a fiscal standpoint will have the same intended effect (investing in renewable energy rather than fossil fuels) while also being more palatable for those who are wary of the social connotations around the word "divestment."

5. Is there anything else you would do to change how the pension funds are managed?

I would increase the number of MWBE firms investing pension money. MWBE firms have historically been on pace with, if not outperformed, the typical Wall Street and multinational banks and, as I stated before, the pensioners deserve the

people investing their money to be representative of them. Furthermore, as with divestment, this will not sacrifice outcomes for political or social goals as we will still be selecting firms that have the ability to give pensioners the highest possible rate of return.

AUDITING

6. How would you utilize the comptroller's auditing power to ensure government agencies and the contracts they engage in result in cost-effective quality delivery of services? What priorities will you have to audit city departments?

As Comptroller, I will create a "Making the Grade" type initiative focused on government waste. As Comptroller, I will give every NYC department and agency a grade from A-F based on how efficient or wasteful they are with taxpayer money. This information will be made publicly available and leaders of agencies or departments that are found to be perennial wasters will be held accountable. As a result, my first priority in auditing city departments will be to identify and eliminate waste. This will be particularly important if Mayor de Blasio's executive budget is approved, as the next administration will be saddled with a large deficit due to his spendthrift attitude towards the federal relief money.

7. As part of your auditing responsibilities, what would your approach be to the NYC Board of Elections? How do you propose to increase its operations and accountability to the city and its voters?

The Board of Elections will play a vital role in the upcoming election with the advent of Ranked Choice Voting (RCV). As Comptroller, I will analyze whether the Board of Elections did a sufficient job educating the public about how RCV works and how to properly fill out a ballot. To achieve this, I will audit the results of the last election looking for key indicators in: voter participation, percentage of ballots filled out correctly, and how efficient the board's counting process was. Based on these results, I will work with the Mayor and City Council to increase funds where necessary; whether that be in public education or hiring more ballot counters to increase the efficiency with the new RCV ballots.

8. How would you create greater disclosure

around city-affiliated nonprofits that are increasingly supplementing the work of city agencies?

As stated above, transparency will be one of the hallmarks of my time as Comptroller. For too long, New Yorkers have had to put up with shady deals- such as the recent revelations about political allies of the Mayor receiving an expensive school bus contract despite having no experience with running a school bus operation- and it is up to the Comptroller, as the overseer of City contracts, to put an end to this. To create greater transparency and disclosure around nonprofits, I vow to increase the speed and efficiency of the FOIL process. Although it was originally designed as a good governance and transparency measure, in reality, FOIL requests have been slow walked by elected officials and department heads. As Comptroller, I will prioritize the response time and fidelity of FOIL requests to ensure that New Yorkers who want to know about the City’s dealings with nonprofits are able to receive accurate information in a timely manner.

BUDGET, FISCAL OVERSIGHT, AND ECONOMY

9. How would you utilize the authority of the comptroller’s office to ensure the fiscal health and integrity of city spending, especially in this moment of economic crisis?

With the confluence of Mayor de Blasio’s newest Executive Budget- which calls for immediately spending nearly all of the federal relief money on quixotic political projects- and the expected deficit running through 2023 due to decreased tax revenue from COVID and the termination of federal relief, the next Comptroller will have to be steadfast in its role as the City’s fiscal watchdog. As stated above, to create accountability for waste, I will continually audit every department and agency for wasteful spending and publish my findings in an annual and public “Making the Grade” report. Moreover, I will hold departments and agencies accountable for a failure to uphold a standard of good governance. For example, for those agencies and departments which continually have a high number of vehicular claims and placard violations submitted against them, I will work with the Mayor and City Council to significantly reduce the fleet and placard distribution

of these organizations. As Comptroller, I will work diligently to let all facets of the City government know that fiscal responsibility is a priority.

10. In FY 2021, New York City spent \$20.5 billion on pensions and fringe benefits for City employees out of a total net budget of \$88.2 billion. What would you do to address the growing pension and health care costs borne by the city and New York City tax payers?

The most efficient and effective means of reining in the ballooning pension costs is to reduce the size of the City's workforce. Under Mayor de Blasio, the number of employees working for New York City has grown by nearly 30,000 and this burden on taxpayers will be felt for years to come. By bringing the number of city employees back down to realistic numbers- there is no reason that a city government should be 1/7th the size of the entire federal government- we will save the City in the long term by reducing the number of pensioners and thus reducing pension costs. There is a fine balance between having enough workers to ensure that the City government operates effectively and having a bloated workforce. Under Mayor de Blasio this workforce has become extraordinarily large and if this trend is not reversed, the cost of the pensions will become increasingly difficult for taxpayers to bear. As Comptroller, I will prioritize identifying redundancies and unnecessary programs which are contributing to the massive increase in the City's workforce. This includes the Absentee Teacher Reserve which is an outdated and sparsely used mode of hiring substitute teachers which costs the city nearly \$138 million. Furthermore, reining in reckless spending projects such as having two teachers in every classroom will allow the City government to use its budget more responsibly while also reducing the current inexorable rise in pension and healthcare costs. As Fitch made evident in its ratings downgrade of NYC municipal bonds, if NYC cannot effectively manage its budget, investors and New Yorkers will lose faith in their government's ability to provide services which could send NYC down a dangerous, 1970's esque spiral.

11. If elected, you will start your term as New York City (hopefully) begins to reopen its businesses, offices, and institutions. How will you utilize the comptroller's office to help rebuild the economic base of NYC?

One of my top priorities is a quick and equitable economic recovery. Without a stable, long-lasting, and universally beneficent pandemic recovery, none of the other positive policies I plan to embark on will be feasible. For me, the success of small businesses and MWBEs are a signal as to whether New York City's recovery as a whole is equitable. Small businesses are the economic and cultural lifeblood of our city as they employ millions of New Yorkers and provide services that our people depend on. To ensure the success of small businesses and MWBEs and get New Yorkers back to work, I will attack the issue at hand from a few different angles. First, we will use the pensions' ETI as seed funds for small businesses and MWBEs across the sectors hardest hit by the pandemic to include: restaurants and bars, theaters, the arts, development, etc. These are the industries that have struggled to retain their workers throughout the pandemic and by supporting them, we can help them hire more New Yorkers and rejuvenate the economy as a whole. Second, we will streamline the process for opening a business in New York City. Currently there is far too much red tape, with over 6,000 rules and 250 related regulations, which hinders the ability for small businesses to proliferate in the post-pandemic recovery. Small businesses drive the city from a jobs and tax revenue perspective and it is essential that we make it easier for them to open. Lastly, we will ensure that New Yorkers working with the City are receiving a prevailing wage. Strong wages keep New Yorkers out of poverty and help uplift the whole community as a result. No single approach will successfully close the fiscal deficit yet through using a variety of mechanisms we can get New Yorkers back to work and ensure this is a recovery that works for everyone. Without attacking this issue first we will not be able to fund and provide all of the City's incredible services.

MISCELLANEOUS

12. Do you believe there needs to be improvements to the comptroller's role and practices? What changes would you make to the structure or functions of the office?

I do believe there needs to be improvements to the Comptroller's role and practices and one of the key changes I will make will be the introduction of the "Five Borough Investment Fund." This fund will be

modelled after New York State’s “Investing in New York” plan and the Canadian model and it will reinvest a portion of NYC’s pension funds back into the city. These investments will be targeting MWBEs, veteran owned businesses, and industries gutted by the pandemic- such as the arts and theaters. Not only will this help create a more equitable pandemic recovery, it will ensure that pension dollars will go into areas that pensioners care about, all at a high rate of return. New York State has seen a 10% rate of return for pensioners and created 9,000 jobs a year through its “Investing in New York” fund and these are the kind of positive numbers that my plan will bring to New Yorkers.

13. 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.

As a first time political candidate, I do not have any legislative background in these areas, however, if elected Comptroller, I promise to work closely with groups such as Citizens Union to ensure that good governance is at the center of my office’s platform.

14. 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: My first priority will be ensuring a quick economic recovery that benefits all New Yorkers, not just those at the top. I refuse to accept the pre-pandemic status quo of a New York City that was a “Tale of two cities” and I will use the pandemic recovery to ensure that fiscal and economic policies are designed with low-income and BIPOC New Yorkers in mind.

Second: My second priority will be to improve the rate of return for the 5 pensions and create more equity in who is investing the pensioners’ money. How we will get there will be, as stated above, hiring more MWBE firms, investing in renewable energy for fiscal reasons, and conducting better hiring practices for investment firms.

Third: My third priority will be refocusing the Comptroller’s role as the City’s fiscal watchdog. Between Mayor de Blasio’s latest proposed spending spree and the expected deficit caused by reduced tax revenue, New York City will need a responsible and active Comptroller making sure that every single taxpayer dollar is being maximized to its full potential.

15. If you have not addressed this already, in what major ways would your priorities as comptroller differ from the incumbent?

The major way that I would differ from the current

Comptroller would be the re-prioritization of the Comptroller as the City's fiscal watchdog. Last year, the Comptroller only found \$31 million- out of a \$90+ billion budget- in savings for the City through audits. This is an unacceptably paltry number in any year, but is especially so during the pandemic when every taxpayer dollar is crucial both to New Yorkers who have to pay and the government that is strained for resources. Therefore, as Comptroller, I will bring fiscal responsibility back to the forefront of the office and I will signal to all of the City departments and agencies that they will be held accountable for failure to eliminate waste and redundancy.

16. In light of everything we have discussed above, why do want to be mayor?

My whole life has been centered around identifying issues and being a part of the solutions. After 9/11, this meant joining the Marine Corps to ensure a better future for this country. When we got home and I saw that we were losing more Marines to suicide than we did in combat, it meant creating a nonprofit to help veterans get access to mental health services. Most recently, during COVID, it meant volunteering at the Javits Center in the nascent days of the pandemic and, as Deputy Director, turning chaos into a functioning hospital. Now, as I look how years of fiscal irresponsibility and the effects of the pandemic have affected New York City's economy, government, and future, I see a City that needs responsible governing and a true fiscal watchdog. As Comptroller, I want to foster a quick and equitable recovery that uplifts every New Yorker. Only through responsible governing can we achieve that and this is what I look to bring back to New York City if elected.

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.