



TEANECK DEMOCRATIC MUNICIPAL COMMITTEE

TEANECKDMC@GMAIL.COM

2024 Teaneck Council Questionnaire

Thank you for accepting the invitation to TDMC Forum. To provide voters with additional information, we are asking candidates to complete and return this questionnaire by September 25th. Please submit responses to TeaneckDMC@gmail.com. You will receive a separate invitation for the TDMC Forum on October 1st from 7:00 pm – 8:30 pm. We look forward to meeting you. Thanks.

Name: Ardie Walser

Address: 350 Johnson Avenue Teaneck, NJ 07666

Please provide a copy of your bio with an emphasis on experiences that qualify you to represent residents on the town council.

1. What is the role of a town council member?

The role of a town council member is to work with fellow council members as a collective legislative body of the municipality. The council represents the local community. It sees to it that the municipality delivers services that meet local needs and wants in an effort to improve the quality of life for all members of the community.

a. Why are you running for Teaneck council?

As a well established diverse community Teaneck is a rare jewel in the northeast. When my wife and I were looking for a place to raise our two sons we searched far and wide and long (two years). We had heard about Teaneck from colleagues and friends and through our own research and from numerous visits to this small town we decided that Teaneck would be the right place to raise our family. Now some 28 years later we were not disappointed. Our family has had many great experiences here. Our sons received an education that has played a major role in the successful careers they now have. I am running for Teaneck council because I want others to have that same wonderful experience that my family and I have had. I am running for Teaneck council because I not only want to sustain the good quality of life many of us have here, I want to expand that gift to our neighbors who have not been able to take advantage of all that our town has to offer. I want to use my, knowledge, skills and experience to help address some of the challenges facing our community. I want us to invest wisely to keep our town secure, safe and affordable. I believe that public input and strategic planning is a key attribute of responsive and responsible governance. I want us to promote collaboration and ensure inclusive representation as one way of nurturing our diversity – Teaneck’s superpower. Together, council and community, we will support our small businesses and help them to grow. We will work towards creating diverse housing options, improving the ability for our elders to continue to live here, a place they call home and everybody knows their name. I want

to make sure we have housing that is accessible to young families looking for a place to grow, like my own many years ago. And last but not least, I wish to protect the parks and open spaces Teaneck is known for as well as improve them. These are a few of the reasons why I am running for council.

2. How will you represent constituents from all of the diverse groups who live here?

I will represent the 41,000 residents of Teaneck with dignity, integrity and respect and with an appreciation for the cultural differences each group brings to our eclectic community.

a. As a council member what would you do to promote harmony and unity in the town?

As a council member who wishes to promote harmony and unity, transparency, active listening and fairness are the order of the day in most situations. Every resident must feel and believe that their voice is heard, even if it is not popular. To promote harmony in our town council members as leaders must help to bridge the gap between members of our community who are at odds with each other. One of the best ways to achieve this is to provide opportunities for residents to get to know each other before a township crisis. And these opportunities should be available often and regularly. For example, the council once provided an opportunity for community members to meet with council members in a causal gathering where they could share their experiences with council members or fellow residents. This event was called "Tea with the Council" or something to that effect. I would like to bring those gathering back. Council meetings themselves are opportunities for the council to create a space where mutual respect and fairness is exercised by residents and council members alike.

Teaneck has a population of over 41,000 people who are representative of a number of ethnic, race and religious groups and who identify themselves as male, female, lesbian, bisexual, gay, transgender, straight and so on and who belong to a wide range of generational groups (e.g., Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, Generation Z). The social and economic status of our residents is wide ranging as well. We pride ourselves on our diversity and being an inclusive community. There is no role more important for a council member than to help improve the relationship between the various groups that constitutes the citizenry of our township. A few more ways to strengthen the positive relationship between groups are:

1. Support current organizations, groups and events that already promote inclusiveness and diversity such as the Teaneck International Film Festival, the Teaneck Community Chorus, A Taste of Teaneck, Teaneck Farmers Market, Teaneck Day;
2. Effectively use the Youth Advisory Board (YAB), the Advisory Board on Community Relations, the Senior Citizens Advisory Board;
3. Work with township religious leaders to create opportunities for residents to visit the many houses of worship to learn how we each

worship;

4. Work with Teaneck public, private and charter schools to create interschool events similar to Building Bridges, a Teaneck public school project that provided the opportunity for young people to learn about each others culture and what they have in common and to appreciate each other's differences.

3. Tell us about a time where you worked through a challenge with a team of people who did not agree on the best solution. How did you navigate conflicting views? How did you resolve the challenge?

As a dean of a school of engineering for over 20 years and as a Teaneck school board president for over nine years, there have been quite a number of occasions when it was necessary for me to achieve consensus among a group of very knowledgeable, intelligent, opinionated and talented individuals. The key to gaining consensus and resolving conflict is to be a patient and active listener and to give each person an opportunity to make their case. Once all opinions are given equal time amongst the group an open discussion about the matter is had weighing the pros and cons of each idea or position. Then a decision is made and consensus is achieved if we are lucky. If not, we start the process all over again until we do. One such occasion occurred when as Teaneck school board president I along with the school board had to determine how to increase the number of Pre-K classes offered by the district and to decide whether or not it was feasible to convert the Eugene Field building, a former school building turned into office space, back into a school. Some board members initially did not support the idea but after a number of meetings and discussions about the need for more Pre-K classes eventually they came around and the building is now the Theodora Smiley Lacey School, offering full day Pre-K to our young families.

4. Should the council engage in international issues?

The role of a town council member is to work with fellow council members as a collective legislative body of the municipality. The council represents the local community addressing local issues.

5. Should the council meet more often? What ideas do you have to best engage Teaneck residents? Are there problems with good and welfare and how should the council address them?

The role of a town council member is to work with fellow council members as a collective legislative body of the municipality. The council represents the local community. Presently it appears that the Teaneck council is experiencing some difficulty in keeping all council members abreast of council actions and activities as well as keeping the public at large well informed. A remedy for this is for the council to add a workshop meeting to its schedule that takes place before its regular public meeting. The workshop meeting is where new projects and official actions are introduced to the entire council

and the public. A week later at the regular public meeting, after the council members have had an opportunity to think things over for a week, more discussions can be had and a vote is taken – or not.

Good and welfare is an opportunity for the council to hear the concerns of the residences of Teaneck. The council might consider adjusting the format by creating two opportunities for residences to speak at a meeting. The first portion could be early in the meeting where residence would speak to items that are not on the agenda and a second portion later in the meeting permitting residents to speak to items that are on the agenda – or visa versa.

6. How do you propose raising additional revenue for the town without increasing property taxes?

Municipalities in the state of New Jersey are required to adopt a balanced budget. The budget accounts for recurring revenues (e.g., property taxes, state and federal aid, licensing, permit fees) and recurring expenditures (e.g., salaries, health care, maintenance, supplies, debt service). It also accounts for one time expenditures like a capital project (e.g., a major repair) and one and done revenues like a grant and the selling of public properties. The municipal budget defines a financial framework for municipal spending during the year that should reflect the services that are needed and desired by it residents and that the municipality can adequately fund. My spending priorities will be dedicated by those things that will either maintain or improve the quality of life for Teaneck residents such as maintaining the services of our schools, police, fire and recreation departments. To offset the rising cost of these services I will work with our town manager, chief financial officer and fellow council members to develop strategies that would include shared services between other municipalities, similar to those the township currently has with Paramus, Hackensack, and Bergen county. We would also look to private/ public partnerships with business and community organizations. It is also imperative to consider how development is done in our town and to demonstrate clearly any added value in terms of additional revues or an improved quality of life for current residents with any new building project.

7. What is “responsible development”? What are your thoughts about the new Master Plan, particularly regarding new housing and retail, as well as the use of AINRs and PILOTS as a development tool?

There appears to be no definitive definition for the term “responsible development.” However, I interpret the phrase as referring to a municipal capital project/s that does not take place until the following considerations are addressed:

- a. The needs and desires of all township stakeholders (e.g., residents, businesses, municipal agencies),
- b. Impact on municipal infrastructure (e.g., traffic, sewer, water, air space)
- c. Impact on schools,

- d. Air quality, open space utilization, waste management
- e. A determination of the net benefits to the township.
- f. Is the project a revenue source or a financial debit or does it break even?
- g. Does it improve or enhance the quality of life for current residents?
- h. Does the new project fit the aesthetics of current structures in the town?
- i. Does the project fit the three pillars (Social, Economic, Environmental) of sustainable development?

The new Teaneck Township Master Plan appears to be out of line with what residents want or need and requires significant rewrites. If they have not done so already the planning board, consisting of hard working volunteers who care about the town, could benefit from unbiased input from subject matter experts. That along with input from a wide cross section of Teaneck residents could help in writing a Master Plan that will provide the council with a road map that will take our township into a promising future.

The current manner in which AINRs (Area In Need of Redevelopment) and PILOTS (Payment In Lieu of Taxes) are used as a development tool appears to be misguided and runs afoul of the current Master Plan and the desires of the residents of Teaneck. The council has done very little or nothing at all to demonstrate, with quantifiable data, the benefits (e.g., revenue, quality of life) of developments in the town over the past twenty or so years.

8. What do you think needs to be done to assure sufficient affordable housing in Teaneck?

Affordable housing is something I think most residents of Teaneck believe in particularly for our young families and seniors on fixed incomes. As municipal leaders council has to balance the need for affordable housing with environmental protection, infrastructure impacts, and the desire to reduce the tax burden on residents. It would be beneficial for council members to attend workshops at the New Jersey League of Municipalities annual conference to learn how other towns have addressed this challenge.

9. What improvements would you like to see in our green spaces, parks, and recreational facilities?

A number of our sport fields need to be renovated in the sake of safety for our young athletes as well as general overall aesthetics. I also would like to see the Mary Topolsky Garden beautified and made more accessible.

10. What is your position on cannabis in Teaneck?

I believe that the creation of cannabis dispensaries in Teaneck is an idea whose time has not yet come.

11. How can Teaneck best serve the needs of its senior citizens? What changes, if any, would you propose?

Like the general population senior citizens in Teaneck are a heterogeneous group consisting of people from many different social economic levels. Some are at the higher

social economic end while others are at the lower end on fixed incomes. For those seniors whose income is fixed and on the lower end, affordable housing is very important and something council should address. For all seniors having a place where they can socialize and connect with people as well as engage their minds is also important.

12. What is the ideal relationship between the council members and the town manager?

The ideal relationship between council members and the town manager should be one of mutual respect and collaboration. The council is the legislative branch of the municipal government and the manager implements the policies established by the council and sees to it that the municipality is well run.

13. It is our understanding that the current police chief may soon retire. What are the qualities of a police chief you would look for in a future candidate for the position of chief of police? What input would the council have in hiring the new police chief?

Besides having a proven track record of good policing experience I would look for a candidate for the position of chief of police for Teaneck to have a high level of cultural competency. The town manager would be expected to work with the council on selecting the appropriate and best fit candidate.

14. How do you feel about term limits on council and committees?

Term limits can be useful for making sure no one serves too long a single elected position (e.g., president). However, much thought should be given to the possibility of unforeseen consequences when implementing a policy of term limits for a legislative body such as the council with three to four seats becoming available for reelection each voting cycle.

15. What aspects of Teaneck do you value most and why?

I value Teaneck's diversity and inclusiveness the most. I believe that is Teaneck's superpower. It enriches the cultural experience and elevates the quality of life of its residence.