



Elizabeth Street Garden Questionnaire - Ben Yee

1. Have you visited Elizabeth Street Garden before? If so, please describe your experience.

I have been to Elizabeth Street Garden many times. I live in the East Village and oftentimes walk by it on my downtown. The garden is a peaceful oasis in this city. It's on a wonderful block and the garden itself is gorgeous. The sculptures give it a wonderful aesthetic and the space is both pleasantly spacious for New York City while maintaining an intimate feel.

2. What is your position on the alternative site solution that would use 388 Hudson – a gravel-filled, city-owned lot – to provide 5x the amount of affordable housing and additional public open space while saving Elizabeth Street Garden?

Obviously the alternative site makes significantly more sense. When I first heard about the Elizabeth Street Garden fight, and small number of units that would be created there, my first thought was to question why the city wasn't looking for a more suitable location. I agree with the idea that the debate between affordable or senior housing and green space is a false dichotomy. Communities need and deserve both, if New York City wants more affordable housing, our government needs to demand more from developers when they build 70 story towers, not tear down the hard work of local residents.

3. Given the immediate threat, how as Public Advocate would you work with our community to protect and preserve Elizabeth Street Garden and use the alternative site for the proposed development?

Land use is easily one of the top three issues facing New Yorkers. It determines our stock of affordable housing, where schools are sited, whether or not neighborhoods have green space and so many other integral factors of New York's social fabric.

Our communities in New York understand that there are many challenges facing the city. They also understand that many of them depend on how we choose to use our land, and that those choices impact the character and makeup of our neighborhoods. As a result, they often have ideas for how they could do their part and what they would like in return from City Hall and other communities.

My plan for addressing the pressing needs of New York comes back to the three programs I plan to run which breakdown participation in city government and empower communities in city decision making (all available on benjaminjee.com/platform). In particular, my second Power for Communities, which brings together civic institutions like community boards, will be an important part of building leverage for plans which are acceptable to New Yorkers and engage stakeholders.

One of the major pain points in addressing New York's issues is that changes foisted upon communities by City Hall are often opposed by residents. As a result, elected leaders regularly override the will of the people, cutting deals among politicians as to who receives upzoning, or where jails or housing will be placed. This allows for a divide and conquer strategy where communities which are not targeted turn a blind eye to what happens in other communities, grateful they dodged the bullet.

As Public Advocate, I would create and resource groupings of civic institutions, starting with Community Boards. These groupings, first at the neighborhood level, then Borough level, then city level, would develop proactive development plans for their communities. This process would allow multiple stakeholders to participate and allow communities to openly and transparently trade over their priorities. In a real life conversation, a group in the Rockaways suggested a program like this would allow their community to offer to take the men's shelter Bayside vehemently opposes in exchange for that community's support of the Queens Link.

When communities can engage the public and each other to create a proactive vision of development, we have a much better chance of building a plan communities will accept. And one which will actually address the issues and priorities in their area. Furthermore, when communities present a united front, disregarding their priorities becomes significantly more difficult for politicians. Citywide electeds need to contest with a citywide, neighborhood-wide or boroughwide coalition and local politicians hoping to move up are now forced to at least consider New York City as a whole, instead of their own parochial interests.

A program like this would bring new allies and new resources to the fight for Elizabeth Street Garden. Other communities anxious for affordable and senior housing could support Downtown Manhattan's push to save green space by offering up even more site options and applying pressure on their own electeds to get involved in keeping the Garden in exchange for bringing new units to where they are most in harmony with community planning and can be built most efficiently. New York is a big city with many needs, to solve them, the city needs to take a holistic approach; not be forced into bad decisions because elected officials demand projects be fit within artificial lines on a map.

Today, our communities and civic institutions are merely advisory to city decision making, our elected representatives are the ones empowered to cast the votes. But our political system has veered away from community input. In order to solve any problem we need a Public Advocate who can think effectively about collaborative decision making and building political power for the disenfranchised.

Finally, this model of coalition building and proactive politics isn't unique to land-use, it is an organizing philosophy which can empower communities and civic institutions on any issue. The four programs I plan to run are based on a badly needed theory of change for how to move New York City from an inequitable top down political model to one of community driven problem solving.

4. What is your position on how the City prioritizes public open green space and how community gardens are being pitted against the need for affordable housing?

As mentioned in questions 2 and 3, dividing communities by forcing competition over basic needs is how overbearing electeds enact their plans, and the plans of special interests, over the will of residents. If we are going have a successful city, we must have a holistic plan for development. New York needs new jails, new housing, new green space and so many other things. Pitting these interests against each other is a guaranteed way to lose on all of them. Only by tackling them together can we develop solutions which meet the needs of residents and build the political power required to force politicians to listen.