



Elizabeth Street Garden Questionnaire - Daniel O'Donnell

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

While I have not visited ESG, I frequent many community Gardens within my district and in Upper Manhattan, including the People's Garden on 111th Street which is down the block from me. I've given many state grants to my community gardens whenever they become available, and I'm particularly cognizant of making sure that the green spaces above 96th Street, the old color divide, are taken care of. I believe that community gardens are a very necessary part of our urban landscape, and that they do wonders in promoting mental health, a gathering place for the community, and a connection to nature. I look forward to visiting ESG soon, and you have my promise that I will add my name to your petition and encourage others to do so as well.

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?

I think if there's an alternative site that currently provides no public good, can provide five times the affordable housing, and includes open space, it's a no-brainer that this project should prioritize that site. There is no reason to fill in every green space with concrete in our city, and the Mayor and the Department of Buildings needs to start listening to communities when they voice opposition to projects and work with them on solutions- not just shove things down their throats.

I've had a similar problem in my district, where the City is pushing for a 22-story nursing home on a vacant lot with toxic levels of lead in the ground. The project would also be within feet of a public school. In this case, there is also an alternative site a few blocks away where a nursing home already exists and can easily be expanded upon. It's been over 10 years since our community began fighting the plan, and the surrounding residential buildings, which are mostly comprised of senior citizens, have been using their own resources to bring lawsuits against DOB's approvals. In this litigation battle, Mayor de Blasio even wrote an amicus brief in favor of the development. Recently, we had a huge victory in the Appellate Court where the court decided the project could no go forward. I immediately wrote a letter to the Mayor asking the City to finally put this to rest and listen to the people- instead they chose to appeal the decision. I'm telling you all this because I know first hand what it takes to fight the City on inappropriate development projects, and even when it takes more than a decade, I do not give up on my community. I have countless stories such as these- including my 20+ year fight for a historic district (that began before I became an elected official) which I finally won last year. As Public Advocate, I would do everything in my power to fight for ESG as well.

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?

I would be firm that community gardens should be the last location to consider for development. I respect the City Council's internal policy of member deference, but I think I'm willing to say that, respectfully, I fundamentally disagree with Council Member Chin on this one. We wouldn't give up Carl Schurz Park to developers, so why ESG, Mandela Community Garden, Mission Garden, Chenchitas Garden, Villa Santurce Jardinera, and others? This trend of filling in all open spaces needs to stop. It's irresponsible development. I've made tackling irresponsible development central to my campaign: we need to increase affordable housing requirements while increasing ULURP requirements. I am tired of the City telling communities what they want instead of asking them what they need. Our community boards are the first line of defense- they are the most accessible level of government to a constituency. As Public Advocate I will immediately look for ways, either legislatively or by using the bully pulpit, to strengthen community boards so that they have the ability to stop development that doesn't belong.

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?

Housing is a fundamental right, and affordable housing must be built throughout the city. That said, to think that the only way to meet our affordable housing needs is to build on community gardens is laughable. First of all, there are far too few of them to begin with, and because of that fact, there is not enough of them to meet the affordable housing needs even if they were all filled in. Second, if we value quality of life at all in our City, including environmental justice, we must treasure our green spaces and fund them- not put them on the chopping block. Finally, the answer to our affordable housing crisis is not to build in green space, but to increase affordable housing requirements in all new developments, instead of relying on upzoning to "encourage" affordable housing development. When member deference saw Long Island City up-zoned to include the only R10 designation outside of Manhattan, the need for affordable housing was cited as the reason. Four years later, every time I'm in LIC I pass a dozen new (and mostly empty!) luxury towers with no affordable housing. Time and again we have had this promised to us, only to see our neighborhoods decimated to the point that they tell us the only possible location left is our green space. It's putting the cart before the horse: You cannot give real estate developers a treat, like being able to build taller market rate buildings, and think that they will out of the good of their hearts build lots of affordable housing. I say no more zoning changes without guarantees, and 80/20 isn't good enough.