

A Vision for Boston: Questions for the 2009 At-Large City Council Candidates

CITY PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

How would you organize planning and development in Boston? Does the BRA sufficiently meet what you think are the key attributes for an effective municipal planning and development function? If yes, explain why or if no, what structure would you advocate that would effectively deliver development and planning services for Boston? Do you believe Boston's Zoning Code adequately serves the needs of Boston and, if not, how should it be altered? Would you consider expanding "as of right" zoning, which would take the authority to oversee certain projects out of the BRA's hands?



Felix Arroyo

It is the responsibility of all City Councilors to review, comment on and help direct development in Boston. The At-Large City Councilor position carries an extra responsibility to ensure that any particular development fits with the needs of the City as whole as well as the specific neighborhood in which development is proposed. I would prioritize affordable housing that is accessible by residents of the neighborhood and consistent with citywide planning efforts. The City must continue to grow and progress but also must remain affordable to a broad range of our working families. Eliminating the Boston Redevelopment Authority and replacing it with a new City Planning Agency would be an important first step towards realizing these objectives. I fully support this reform effort which would have the added benefit of ensuring more independence at the Boston Zoning Commission. As your new City Councilor At Large, my staff and I will work diligently to foster an open, inclusive process that educates the public, engages citizens in informed decision-making and returns neighborhood planning to the people of Boston.

John Connolly

Whether you are a business person who helps fuel Boston's economic growth and job creation, or a resident concerned about the impact of a proposed development on the quality of life in your neighborhood, we all want a zoning, development, permitting, and licensing process that is clear and fair, and not an insider's game. We need a system that advances thoughtful, complete development plans that contribute to the City's economic growth, job creation, and aesthetic appeal, thereby preserving the highest quality of life in our neighborhoods and making Boston more livable.

The key is a process that sets forth clear rules, requirements, and standards and takes an unbiased approach toward each applicant and project so that all parties know and understand the process. A transparent process that dictates the results for each proposal or application based on merits alone will be a process that works for everyone involved, from the civic leader or abutting neighbor to the business person or non-profit institution. I will continue working hard to level the playing field for our residents, businesses, and institutions so that we all have a full, fair, and expedient development process.

Tomas Gonzalez

The BRA has had great success but it lacks transparency and accountability. It must be split into two separate agencies: one concerned with planning and the other with development. In order to balance planning and development power there should be five board members for each agency: two selected by the Mayor, two by the City Council, and one by the state.

I believe that the zoning code serves Boston well for the most part, but that we need to make sure that the code becomes more supportive of small business development, and of businesses that want to relocate to Boston. It needs to be easier to do business in Boston. We know that Boston can't compete with other cities based on affordable housing or low taxes, so we need to ensure that our city agencies and codes are as helpful and responsive to business owners as possible. For example, we could provide business owners with 'one stop shopping' where they work with one person at an agency who can help them navigate the whole process of business establishment. We can also create a mechanism within the zoning code to encourage business growth in targeted areas.

Tito Jackson

The Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA) serves two critical functions for the City of Boston by providing both planning and development services. The BRA can be credited with many contributions to the economic development of the City, including moving Boston to the forefront of sustainable development through a number of notable projects in green building practices. The hard work of BRA employees in these efforts should certainly be acknowledged, many Boston residents are rightly concerned about the combination of these two functions within a single largely autonomous organization. While any agency can act more quickly and efficiently by centralizing its decision-making process, this typically comes at the cost of accountability to its constituents.

As an At-Large City Councilor, I would strongly advocate for the separation of the planning and development functions currently housed in the BRA. Citizens have the right to know how decisions are being made about development within their community and across the City as a whole. Dividing the two functions of the BRA into separate agencies would retain the service of the talented professionals who currently work there, while dramatically increasing the transparency of decisions made that have both planning and development impact.

Andrew Kenneally

As someone who got his masters studying city planning at Boston University, I love planning. The problem I hear from residents and developers alike is the lack of predictability. For residents, land that may have been closed to development suddenly becomes open. For developers the extensive community process can be tiring and costly as they wait to put shovels in the ground.

What Boston needs is a long range, detailed plan that establishes how we want to lay out our city so that everyone knows what is expected. This will speed development in the places we want it while preserving the character of Boston's neighborhoods. I am also open to learning more about a separate city planning department, but I am weary of further politicizing the process and thereby slowing down development in the city.

Ayanna Pressley

The BRA has become a lightning rod of criticism, simply because of the secrecy with which it operates. Because they are an authority, the public doesn't get to see their actual budget, and we often aren't sure what is happening there.

The BRA must separate planning and development. Other major cities don't combine those functions. The BRA must open up its books for real City Council budget hearings, to allow the public a chance to actually see what is going on and how it can be done better. The BRA does not currently offer effective municipal development, because the process is kept fairly quiet, and the public is often brought in too late. This has led to a culture of distrust around the BRA. And the BRA should encourage good development in every neighborhood in the city, encouraging more transit-oriented development in particular.

I would be open to considering "as of right" zoning that was developed through an open, inclusive process that avoided the pitfalls of giving developers more freedom to develop more easily without community process.