



Ryder Kessler for AD 66

Responses to DID Candidate Survey

1. Why this seat, why now?

- a) What motivates you to run for AD-66 at this moment, and what in your background best prepares you to represent the district effectively in Albany?

I'm a child of the district: a gay kid born at St. Vincent's who played little league basketball at Tony Dapolito and got his Bar Mitzvah cake at Veniero's. I've spent my life here—and my career working to expand opportunity, strengthen democracy, and help this city live up to its promise.

When my parents moved to 11th Street in 1980, my father was a cab driver and my mother was an artist. Lower Manhattan was affordable and accessible. More than that, it represented freedom. Indeed, my gay great-uncle brought my mother to Stonewall before the riots dressed in full drag. Born into poverty, to immigrants who had fled religious intolerance, Uncle Jerry could be himself in the Village. Today, the neighborhoods where I played as a kid are at risk of becoming a playground for the ultra-rich. My nephew and nieces will not be able to live here as adults if we don't take drastic action today—that's why I'm running.

Early in my career, I founded a company that raised millions for low-wage workers and nonprofits. I started working in politics after 2016, joining the resistance to fight back against Donald Trump's first-term agenda, ultimately building teams to protect voters and our elections. In 2018, I joined Manhattan's Community Board 2 to give back to the community that has given me so much. Since then, I have built a movement of 4,000 New Yorkers newly engaged in local politics—working together to create affordable homes, fund public transit, and tackle climate change.

- b) How have you been involved in the community/district over the past two years? Name some of the organizations, community work, coalitions, etc., that you've taken part in.

I joined CB2 in 2018, where I am glad to build consensus on challenging issues. That's what I'll do in the legislature. The first resolution I authored declared CB2's support for a controversial bill to raise the cap on street vending permits. The cap has pushed largely immigrant vendors into exploitative permit rentals, or into operation in the shadows. The bill passed, and was recently expanded. A recent resolution I wrote reaffirmed our support of the Paul's Place Safe Haven on 14th Street, a critical resource for street homeless New Yorkers in the district.

I've also served more directly: as a youth mentor at the LGBT Center and as a volunteer with the Lower Manhattan chapter of Open Hearts (e.g. distributing care packages to homeless New Yorkers). I recently created the Downtown West group for Hands Off NYC, which has been a venue of important coordination for anti-ICE action—including recent protection of immigrant

New Yorkers on Canal Street. I will be a legislator who works in Albany and on the streets of our district.

Broadly, I have delivered benefits to the district through my professional work. I launched a nonprofit after my 2022 race to continue advancing the values I ran on. That community of over 4,000 New Yorkers has mobilized to protect congestion pricing, help pass landmark affordable housing measures, and elect leaders like Zohran Mamdani. Bus riders, renters, and all marginalized New Yorkers in our district and beyond will benefit from these efforts.

2. District triage.

What are the three most urgent issues facing AD-66 specifically (not New York State in general), and why do they rise above others?

Housing costs: In Manhattan, average rents are over \$5,000 a month. Rents are rising seven times faster than wages. 100,000 New Yorkers sleep each night in a shelter; thousands are on the streets or in the subways. In our district, the median household income is double the city's overall—but that doesn't tell the full story. Even high-income earners struggle to afford rent and childcare, low-income tenants are in precarious stabilized apartments or reliant on elusive rental assistance, and homeowners whose homes may be valuable on paper are being hit with skyrocketing utility and insurance costs. And not everyone is doing well: 11% of our elders are in poverty, as are 3% of our kids.

Street homelessness: Local 311 reports confirm what we know: encampments are the number one cause of neighborhood concern. We must actually end street homelessness, breaking cycles of distress and disorder that unsettle our neighborhoods and harm our neighbors who are already vulnerable.

Traffic violence: More New Yorkers are killed every year by cars than by guns, but we don't treat reckless driving as the public safety emergency it is. Cars are getting larger and deadlier, and a small subset of drivers are operating them dangerously. E-bikes—particularly those used by deliveristas facing unreasonable demands from app companies—are causing unease on the sidewalk.

3. Intellectual honesty.

Name one position you held in the last five years that you have since changed your mind about. What evidence, experience, or reasoning caused the shift?

When Zohran Mamdani first announced his plan for fast and free buses, I was excited—about the fast part. New York buses are the slowest in the country, and they're relied on by low income New Yorkers to get to work, school, medical appointments, and to see friends. But I believed that pursuing "free" could undermine service scale and quality. However, after more deeply engaging with research and analysis (e.g. <https://nyc.streetsblog.org/2025/04/14/free-buses-would-mean-12-percent-faster-rides-and-20-percent-more-riders-per-year-study>)—and speaking with leaders in the issue space (such as Betsy Plum of Riders Alliance, with whom I regularly work in coalition on local issues)—I changed my mind. I now see free buses as a way

to further serve the goal of bus quality and equity. I am always open to what data shows, and to what trusted issue experts advocate.

4. Independence in practice.

What concrete actions in your career demonstrate independence from party leadership, political machines, or entrenched interests?

In 2022, I challenged 32-year incumbent Assemblymember Deborah Glick—elected when I was five years old—because I knew lower Manhattan needed bolder representation in Albany.

I was chosen by 4,000 voters and earned 30% of the vote. I received more votes than 13 of 33 winning Assembly candidates that cycle. I ran a \$285,000 campaign with high-quality consultants and staff, putting up a real fight in spite of many elected officials and interest groups lining up with the incumbent.

I built a coalition across progressive organizations like the WFP, Citizen Action, CUFFFH, Empire State Indivisible, and No IDC NY; urbanist organizations like StreetsPAC; the queer progressive Jim Owles Club; and more.

Uniting progressives, renters and riders, urbanists, queer voters, newcomers, and others, we asserted power in the face of a deeply entrenched status quo.

5. Campaign finance and ethics.

What specific reforms would you champion to strengthen New York's campaign finance and ethics system (e.g., coordination rules, disclosure, enforcement, ethics oversight)? Please be concrete.

Before working in local politics, I specialized in voter protection—working to advance free, fair, and representative elections. Empowering individual donors rather than corporate interests is core to that mission. Indeed, I made this point in testimony to the State Senate in 2022 arguing for full funding of the state public match program (https://www.nysenate.gov/sites/default/files/public_financing_testimony_ryder_kessler.pdf). I will continue to advocate for a muscular public financing program while in office, while working to strengthen all facets of New York's democracy and enfranchisement.

Further, I will support ethics reforms including S426 Liu, which requires sexual harassment training for lobbyists and S2454 Gianaris, which prevents taxpayer reimbursement of campaign or legal defense funds used by public figures to pay off personal legal fees.

6. Outside employment.

Should state legislators be allowed to hold outside employment? If yes, under what limits (type of work, income caps, conflicts rules, disclosure)? If no, why not?

The current landscape of outside employment rules—capping outside income, limiting the types of earning to avoid conflicts of interest with legislative activity, and requiring robust

disclosures—are sensible. I am open to arguments for their expansion or amendment.

At the same time, I appreciate the possibility for unrelated activity to earn a legislator income. One of my professional mentors, Stacey Abrams, wrote romance novels while serving in the Georgia legislature; that seems like a straightforwardly non-conflictual activity that also seems helpful for blowing off professional steam!

7. Judicial selection.

Should New York reform how judges are selected, including the judicial convention system for State Supreme Court? If so, how?

Right now, our selection of judges is confusing, opaque, and controlled by party insiders. I would prefer a more open system that emphasizes merit. I would defer to experts in designing the right replacement system; after a robust process of public feedback, I would champion statutory and/or constitutional changes to improve how our judges are selected.

8. Strengthening democracy.

a) Should ranked-choice voting be expanded beyond NYC? Why or why not? (in brief)

Yes.

In 2020, I was the Voter Protection Director for the Maine Democratic Party supporting the election of Joe Biden and down-ballot Democrats. Given Maine's pathbreaking role in implementing RCV, I am now an RCV expert and advocate.

RCV is proven to increase diverse candidates' chances of winning elections, to increase participation in elections, and to increase the civility of campaigns. The mayoral primary last year demonstrated that. We should be using RCV in primaries like this one!

b) Are there any changes to the New York Constitution you support? Why?

Yes, I was a strong supporter of the amendments to legalize same-day voter registration and no-excuse absentee voting.

As a voter protection professional, I have seen these practices work across the country—including in red and purple states—to increase participation and faith in our Democratic processes. I was incensed that the state Democratic leadership, starting with party chair Jay Jacobs, invested zero dollars in the amendment campaigns when they were recently on the ballot, while Republicans and Conservatives spent millions to oppose them. I wrote about this in an op-ed: <https://www.gothamgazette.com/130-opinion/10906-jay-jacobs-new-york-pro-democracy-movement>

Further, I would support constitutional changes to end the patronage-addled Board of Election system, shifting to a framework in line with other states in which elections are administered by non-partisan experts rather than political appointees.

9. Zoning and housing supply.

Do you support statewide zoning reforms to increase housing production (e.g., by-right housing, transit-oriented upzoning, legalization of multifamily housing)?

If yes, what model and guardrails do you favor?

If no, what scalable alternative do you propose?

Yes, we are in a profound housing shortage regionally, and every community must do its part to contribute new homes. The reforms proposed in the Governor's Housing Compact in 2023 were on target—for example, making it easier to build new homes near transit, legalizing ADUs, and setting growth targets for every municipality. No neighborhood or city can solve our crisis together.

10. State vs. local authority. (1,479/1,500)

When, if ever, should the state override local zoning and land-use rules?

As proposed under the terms of the Housing Compact and seen successfully implemented in other jurisdictions, we must implement a process by which new homes can be built in municipalities that are blocking homes needed by their populations. Local jurisdictions should always be given the opportunity to comprehensively plan and approve new homes at all income levels; but, if they cannot or will not, a “builder’s remedy” to override those restrictions is critical given the scale of our affordability crisis.

11. Preservation vs. homes.

How should New York balance historic preservation with housing needs in Manhattan?

If a project meets objective standards but faces organized neighborhood opposition, how would you approach the decision?

Our neighborhoods are beautiful, and their historic character must be retained. At the same time, we must think about what we are preserving when we over-emphasize unchanging facades at the expense of the growth and change we need. Today, Jane Jacobs’s home—where she lived as an author and advocate—is for sale for \$5.5 million. While it looks the same on the outside, the character of the families that could afford to live in it has changed drastically. Townhouses that were once home to many working families are now single-family mansions for billionaires. I will emphasize preserving all facets of neighborhood character—from the feel of our streets and their architectural heritage, to the diversity and accessibility of our neighborhoods to people of all income levels and backgrounds.

12. Rent regulation philosophy.

Is New York’s housing situation best served by expanding tenant protections and rent control regulations, reforming them, or rolling them back? What evidence informs your view, and what would change your mind?

Rent stabilization is essential to provide opportunities for New Yorkers to live in the city, and I oppose efforts to undermine the system or to raise revenue for landlords through the

pocketbooks of current rent stabilized tenants. At the same time, the rent stabilized housing stock is under threat of insolvency; we must ensure these buildings stay operative and high-quality for the benefit of those same tenants.

I will be laser-focused on lowering costs to operate these buildings: utility and insurance rates are skyrocketing faster than inflation, and the cost pressure is leading to landlord advocacy for HSTPA rollbacks. We can crack down on insurance companies and utilities, and deploy renewable energy at scale, to lower these costs and ensure the sustainability of these homes without undermining rent stabilization. Additionally, through resources like the J-51 tax incentive, we can facilitate improvements to apartments without charging renters more.

13. Elizabeth Street Garden

Elizabeth Street Garden is now officially designated parkland. Under the public trust doctrine, land formally dedicated as parkland cannot be sold, leased, or used for non-park purposes without express legislative authorization. If elected, would you vote to remove Elizabeth Street Garden as parkland if that vote came up? Why or why not? (In brief)

I have long advocated for building affordable housing for low-income seniors, and 16,000 square feet of permanently public green space, on this city-owned plot. I would support efforts to build Haven Green once elected. At the same time, I understand the strong feelings of love for the community programming offered by the ESG today; I look forward to moving beyond this conflict to a more expansive view of how to solve our housing problems. Indeed, a decades-long battle over one plot exemplifies the broken piecemeal approach we are stuck in to address what are actually structural challenges.

14. Making it easier to get stuff done.

a) Briefly state your diagnosis of what most impedes housing delivery in New York and how that diagnosis informs your policy approach.

At a high level, the creation of new homes is proven to lower rents and reduce displacement at a neighborhood level, so we must add new housing at all income levels—such as projects coming to Gansevoort Square and 388 Hudson, as well as more housing citywide and region-wide—to achieve longer-term affordability. Until then, the 50-year low 1.4% vacancy rate continues to give landlords all the power to choose, rather than compete for, their tenants. Today, this progress is impeded by overly restrictive zoning and the extensive and expensive processes used to approve new homes.

It has been encouraging to see progressive leaders like Brad Lander and Mayor Mamdani championing change. For example, the mayor told the New York Times that the issue on which he has most changed his mind is the necessity of building market-rate housing to address the affordability crisis. Both leaders supported the charter amendments to speed housing production (including for market-rate housing if rezoning to 130% or less of current capacity). And the new Deputy Mayor for Housing was a chief architect of the City of Yes for Housing Opportunity. Progressivism in 2026 requires a bold, all-of-the-above approach to this crisis.

b) Name one specific approval, review, discretionary power, or program you would limit, reform, or eliminate—for housing or transit—while preserving safety and environmental review.

SEQRA reform, the environmental review process that governs new home and infrastructure development, should be reformed to exempt or fast-track what we want most of—from modest new affordable housing to key climate or resiliency infrastructure—while retaining it as-is for large housing or fossil fuel projects. (For example, RPA is supportive of current proposals to update this 50-year-old law to address the needs of today <https://rpa.org/news/news-release/statement-from-open-new-york-and-rpa-on-modernizing-the-state-environmental-quality-review-act-seqra>).

15. Disruption tradeoffs.

Would you support policies that allow more short-term construction disruption (noise, street closures, visual impact) in exchange for faster and cheaper delivery? What limits would you impose?

We built the Empire State Building in 13 months; today, new infrastructure projects take years. More concentrated construction completed more quickly is preferable to endless delays. Recent efforts in the City Council to speed projects requiring scaffolding, for example, demonstrate a shifting preference for more robust public sector capacity that can deliver updates to the streetscape more quickly.

16. Infrastructure cost crisis.

New York infrastructure projects often cost multiples of peer regions. What specific reforms would you support to reduce costs and timelines (e.g., standardization, procurement reform, in-house capacity, limiting late scope changes, narrowing veto points)? What tradeoffs are you willing to accept?

The MTA is making good progress on implementing procedures like progressive design-building and “insourcing” to lower costs and speed delivery times. (See for example: <https://nyc.streetsblog.org/2025/05/15/not-the-same-ol-mta-cost-of-upgrading-subway-signals-is-cut-in-half>). We should build on these reforms across agencies and continue to innovate based on best practices from other jurisdictions.

17. MTA governance and accountability. (1,302/1,500)

What is one governance or accountability reform you would pursue for the MTA (board structure, transparency, capital oversight, procurement, labor rules, or operations), and what problem would it solve?

Riders should have a true voice and vote on the MTA Board. I support the Rider Representation Act to improve the diversity of the Board and the power of community interests.

18. Congestion pricing.

What, if any, specific changes do you support to the existing congestion pricing model, and why?

Congestion pricing has been an unmitigated success, lowering commute times and speeding buses, reducing emissions and traffic violence, and making our streets more pleasant and more vibrant—all while raising \$550M for the MTA. I support expanding the zone and building on our “street dividend” to add more dedicated busways and pedestrian space for New Yorkers. At the same time, I think we can raise the fees for FHV’s to further reduce traffic in the zone.

19. Street safety authority.

Would you grant NYC broader authority to use automated enforcement (speeding, blocked crosswalks, bus and bike lanes), subject to due-process and privacy safeguards? What else can be done to improve street safety for pedestrians in New York?

Yes, it is absurd that the city must continually come to Albany to ask for permission to set its own speed limits and approve its use of automated enforcement. I would empower the city to more continually keep our streets safe.

To improve safety further, we should mandate speed limiters when a driver has a record of recklessness, removing repeat offenders from the street altogether. And we should design better streets to keep kids, elders, and disabled New Yorkers safe—including deploying hardened daylighting, already mandated outside NYC, and other traffic calming and low-traffic measures.

Further, we should protect pedestrians from e-bikes by banning certain motorized vehicles and cracking down on app companies that incentivize lawbreaking while punishing offenders. We can also drastically expand protected bike lanes to give riders a safe place to be.

20. State vs. city climate power.

Should the state remove obstacles to city-led climate policies (e.g., building electrification, performance standards, clean-energy siting)? Where should statewide uniformity prevail, and where should local flexibility apply?

Yes, given the urgency of the climate crisis, we should set strong statewide mandates such as those passed in the CLCPA, while allowing local jurisdictions to go above and beyond the statewide baselines—e.g. through laws like Local Law 97 to reduce emissions from our buildings. Statewide uniformity should be a floor, not a ceiling, for our climate actions.

21. Climate strategy.

Should New York incorporate explicit carbon pricing (tax or fee), or rely primarily on regulation and targeted investments? Why? (in brief)

Cap-and-invest is a win/win for emissions reductions and investments in climate-friendly infrastructure. It should be implemented quickly and comprehensively.

22. Environmental review reform.

Should New York's environmental review process explicitly assess the environmental costs of *not* proceeding with a project (such as increased emissions, sprawl, or displacement) alongside the impacts of development? If so, what changes would you support?

Yes, SEQRA is fifty years out of date and does not accurately synthesize the true costs of action or inaction.

23. Schools: outcomes vs. process.

How should Albany approach NYC public school governance, funding formulas, class-size mandates, and charter school policy to prioritize student outcomes and family needs? Where should flexibility increase, and what accountability should accompany it?

The state should continue updating the Foundation Aid formula to fund our public schools more fully. State mandates for best practices—from class size to curriculum to interventions like the cell phone ban—are an appropriate use of legislative power. We should not increase charter school presence in the education system; we should be investing fully in our public schools.

24. Mental health and addiction capacity.

What state-level changes would you support to expand the supply of effective mental health and addiction care in lower Manhattan, beyond simply creating new programs?

We must end the scarcity of psychiatric beds, supportive housing, Safe Haven shelters, and stabilization beds that actually get homeless New Yorkers off of streets and out of subways. Until then, sweeps will be temporary band-aids rather than long-term cures. We can also build stronger pathways to housing and healthcare for street homeless New Yorkers with coordinated case management. When needed, we should require help for those who are unable to choose it for themselves.

25. Critical health infrastructure.

Lower Manhattan lost a major hospital (Mount Sinai Beth Israel) after years of financial struggles and legal challenges, despite efforts by community advocates to keep it open. What specific actions should state government take to ensure that critical health care access is preserved in high-need neighborhoods when major hospitals seek to close? How would you tailor these actions to suit the medical needs of downtown Manhattan? Be concrete.

Statewide, 80% of New Yorkers worry about affording healthcare. Locally, we're losing our hospitals. St. Vincent's, where I was born, shuttered its emergency rooms on April 9, 2010; on April 9, 2025, Beth Israel closed its doors. In the richest city in the richest country on earth, it doesn't have to be this way.

First, we should pass the New York Health Act, creating a single-payer system for all New Yorkers. Quality healthcare untethered from jobs means freedom. As a New Yorker who gets multiple regular treatments for chronic health conditions (which would be impossible to afford without insurance), I know how life choices are constrained by access. We can also lower

medical costs by demanding transparency from providers, reducing waste and workforce constraints, and preventing corporate consolidation.

We must push hospital networks to add more capacity for the full suite of treatment downtown Manhattanites need, and leverage Albany power to achieve it.

26. Public order and civil liberties.

What role should **New York State law, funding, and oversight** play in keeping streets, transit, and public spaces safe and functional, and how should the state set standards for policing and public safety that protect civil liberties while allowing effective enforcement?

Even before Trump took office for a second time, New York was far from living up to the values of equal justice for all—with an overreliance on policing and incarceration. I am excited about the Mayor’s proposed Department of Community Safety to more holistically and humanely address the needs of communities—and I would like to see increased funding and innovation around Cure Violence models of violence interruption. Assemblymember Cunningham has introduced a bill to create stable funding for community-based violence interruption programs; I would be keen to support this effort in the legislation.

Further, there are proactive investments we can make in programs like Summer Youth Employment that have proven impact on reducing incarceration and fatality rates when young people are given jobs. Scaling up state funding through Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) to make this program universal rather than lotteried, would pay incredible dividends in reduced violence, mortality, and incarceration—more than paying for itself.

27. Oversight muscle.

What is **one** area where the Assembly should use oversight more aggressively, and what would be the first hearing, audit, or information request you would push for?

We must more aggressively interrogate insurance companies whose price increases are putting new home creation and rent stabilized housing operations under threat. The Senate has been holding hearings to understand the rising costs of insurance, but we must understand how profit motives and driving massive increases—and how the state can put a stop to them.

28. AI, privacy, and civil rights.

As New York increasingly uses AI systems and large-scale data processing in government and the private sector, what guardrails should be required to protect New Yorkers’ rights and democratic accountability?

Please discuss your view of the recently enacted RAISE Act, and describe the core principles you would prioritize—such as limits on data use, transparency and oversight for high-risk systems, meaningful notice and human review for consequential decisions, and effective enforcement—along with how those principles should be applied in practice.

As a democracy professional and former tech CEO, I am keenly aware of the dangers posed by unfettered development of technology that is not in the public interest. In addition to passing robust protections for data privacy and ensuring that algorithmic biases are not introduced to government service delivery, we must prioritize fighting disinformation, deepfakes, and other AI activity that generates negative social impact while creating profit for corporations. Further, we should crack down on the data centers that increase energy demand—and energy prices—without benefiting the public. At the same time, we can and should consider how developing technologies can serve the public interest, for example by strengthening the speed of public service delivery.

The RAISE Act is a good first step to properly planning for and mitigating catastrophic risks that come from unfettered AI model development.

29. Do you support: Treatment Not Jail Act, prioritizing community-based treatment and services over incarceration.

Yes

30. Do you support: Ending Qualified Immunity (S1991/A4331)

Yes

31. Do you support: Fair & Timely Parole (S7514/A4231A) and Elder Parole (S15A/A3475A)

Yes

32. Do you support: Daniel's Law (S4814/A4697), which would remove police officers as first responders to most mental health and substance use crises and instead deploy trained mental health professionals, peers, and other health workers

Yes

33. Do you support: Any further rollbacks of New York's bail reform laws? If so, please explain (in brief)

No

34. Do you support: Any rollbacks of Raise the Age? If so, please explain (in brief)

No

35. Do you support: Any rollbacks of New York’s discovery reform laws? If so, please explain (in brief)

No

36. Do you support: Eliminate Mandatory Minimums Act — eliminating mandatory minimum sentences, including New York’s two- and three-strike laws, to allow judges to consider individual circumstances

Yes

37. Do you support: Second Look Act — allowing judges to review and reconsider excessive sentences based on demonstrated transformation or changes in law and norms

Yes

38. Do you support: Earned Time Act — expanding and strengthening earned time, good time, and merit time programs to support rehabilitation and family reunification

Yes

39. Do you support: The full decriminalization of sex work? Please explain (in brief)

Yes. Ending the criminalization of sex work has been a priority since my 2022 race, and was a key point of differentiation between me and my opponent. I am eager to bring true justice-oriented leadership to this district—and to uplift the communities who participate in sex work so that they are protected rather than punished.

40. Constituent accountability.

How will you maintain ongoing, transparent communication with constituents?

I look forward to regularly engaging with constituents through town halls; open lines of virtual communication; monthly appearances at Democratic Club, Community Board, and block association meetings; and by being out on the streets every day. As Jumaane Williams often says, public service is not about the title you hold—it’s about the people you represent. I look forward to representing every member of District 66 and serving our critical interests.