

Dr Michael Russo • 201-401-9687 • councilmanrusso@gmail.com

Public Safety & Transportation

What is your plan to improve auto safety and reduce vehicular incidents in Hoboken? How would you assess the effectiveness of the city's "Vision Zero" program, and what, if any, changes would you propose?

I don't agree with Mayor Bhalla on everything, but I'd generally consider Vision Zero successful. It's true that Hoboken was never a major hotbed of traffic fatalities, but nevertheless, saving human lives is valuable, and eliminating traffic fatalities altogether is worthy of praise.

The main street safety problem we have right now is the e-bike delivery drivers. Unfortunately, because these drivers use delivery apps which assign them ratings partially based on speed of delivery, they have a perverse incentive to blatantly violate traffic safety laws. They ride on sidewalks, speed through red lights, and there have even been reports of groping and catcalling, which obviously has nothing to do with the apps but remain a critical issue to be solved. We have laws that address these things, from the "tests and vests" ordinance which I proudly co-sponsored, to basic common sense traffic regulations; the problem is that the administration does not enforce those laws. On Day One as Mayor, I will begin ticketing noncompliant individuals without exception and create a safer environment on Hoboken's streets.

I'll also get my engineering team together and see what changes can be made to street infrastructure to make sure that our goal of improving traffic flow and Vision Zero improvements are able to coexist.

What is your comprehensive vision for transportation that addresses the needs of both commuters and residents, including solutions for parking and the flow of bike messengers and pedestrians?

We need to create more parking in the City of Hoboken, period. Currently 3 out of our 5 garages are located within two blocks of each other, all by the PATH station. This concentrates vehicular traffic and totally prevents visitors from experiencing every part of our city. When I'm Mayor I will: create more parking on the outer edges of town; push for new residential development to include parking spaces for residents; reinvent the Hop service to include new routes, modern vehicles, and ride share components; make parklet permits seasonal instead of annual; and simplify parking signage. I'll also immediately move to delineate spaces so we can finally have an accurate count of our real parking inventory. The goal is to free up street spots, encourage visitors to patronize our businesses without circling the block five times, incentivize residents to park indoors, spread out the flow of traffic, and help more neighborhood mom and pop shops get love from patrons.

Fiscal Policy and Budget

Please outline your philosophy on tax policy and budget management. What specific areas of the city budget do you believe are in need of improvement or could be optimized for efficiency?

Generally speaking my philosophy is: if you're going to borrow money for something, that something should make money for you. I think we missed a big opportunity by not including revenue-generating components in ResilienCity Park, for example. If we want nice things, I also believe we should bring in more funding sources; over the last 16 years we have had no major ratables come online and it shows. Our outgoing BA, our current BA and I agree: there is a gaping structural deficit that City Hall has failed to address, and the solution is either a massive tax increase or a massive increase in ratables. I favor the latter; my opponents have chosen the former time and time again.

I also think our administration is too top-heavy. We don't need assistant directors everywhere. On Day One I will review our organizational structure and seek to slim down the size of our local government, consolidating departments without depriving us of critical functions. If I expand the government in any areas, it will be to suit our basic needs and core competencies, like hiring first responders. Otherwise, building a zero-based budget with the exception of money that's already been encumbered is the way forward, and I'm committed to the task.

Housing & Development

Given the challenges of urban density, what is your plan to manage financially responsible development and the use of PILOT agreements in a way that protects existing infrastructure and justifies their fiscal impact to Hoboken's taxpayers?

What is your position on Hoboken's existing rent control ordinance? What changes if any would you wish to see?

The land in Hoboken is incredibly valuable and every developer knows that. I'm not opposed to PILOTs, but there's got to be a win for all residents in every single one. For example, when I negotiated the 7Seventy House project, we got a beautiful plaza, playground, and what is now called the Damon Murray Community Gym. Furthermore, Hoboken residents suffer in other ways when landlords ignore their obligations to keep units affordable. I will enforce rent and affordable housing components of all redevelopment agreements, PILOT or not. There needs to be an equal playing field for everyone and my prime directive is building back Hoboken's middle class.

Regarding our rent control laws, the City Council attempted to clarify them in a 5-4 vote in 2023. The amendment would have done a few things, including capping rent increases at 5%. Unfortunately, Mayor Bhalla vetoed that ordinance, setting off a year-and-a-half-long crisis involving compromise ordinances and a referendum. I still believe in the spirit of that original 2023 ordinance, and the majority of the City Council at the time was in agreement.

Sanctuary City

Please define your position on Hoboken's status as a sanctuary city. Given a scenario where an undocumented person commits a crime, is found guilty, and prosecuted, what would your administration's policy be regarding cooperation with federal agencies such as ICE?

When someone commits a crime, they should face criminal punishment. I have no problem with getting criminals out of Hoboken. However, criminal warrants require a judge's signature. That is the line for me. My focus will always be on maintaining safety in Hoboken, and in order to do that, with respect to immigration issues we will only cooperate with lawful warrants that are signed by a judge.

My running mate Dean Murray, who's seeking a Council At-Large seat, has been a superstar immigration attorney for years. I speak with him all the time about his experiences dealing with the asylum process and how one of the biggest problems with our country's immigration system is that the rules are never clearly communicated with those who want to come here and that the policies are always changing—creating a world of confusion. I think our solution, whatever it may be, needs to lead with compassion.

Homelessness

What is your approach to addressing homelessness in Hoboken, and what is your plan for providing services and shelter to the city's homeless population?

The Hoboken Shelter should be expanded because homelessness is a problem that's been getting much worse since the pandemic, due to a variety of factors including mental health and the price of housing. I'd like to move the existing shelter to a facility which would be built in the northwest part of the city where the new DPW is. I'd also like to provide more resources for transient individuals, including access to social workers, grants that cover security deposits to get them into stable housing, and prep/suitable clothing for job interviews. My faith compels me to help those of us who are least fortunate and I believe that any approach here should be guided by compassion and the desire to build up human dignity.

Public Education

What is your long-term vision for the future of public education? How would you make that vision a reality, and what role do you see charter schools playing in that plan?

I think education in Hoboken has a phenomenal landscape where parents can make a variety of choices that are best for their children. It was a no-brainer to vote to allocate PILOT funds to those public districts, including our charter schools, through the first-of-its-kind School Improvement Trust Program, and I believe those schools deserve that funding. Hoboken's current structural deficit leaves a ton of room for growth of our ratables, and I'll be looking to expand the Trust Program through the revenues attained in future PILOT agreements.

Do you support school choice? If you do, would you support a voucher system?

I love and respect the level of choice that parents are currently given within our school system, which includes our charter schools. I believe that introducing a voucher system at this time would take funds away from our public school system, which is one of the best in the state.

Governance & Trust

What specific steps would you take to establish and maintain transparency and accountability in your administration? What would be your policy on OPRA responsiveness? Exclusions?

I think OPRA compliance is a great place to explore the integration of AI. The primary reason for this is that large-language models (LLMs) are now capable of producing records requests, and one can reasonably expect the scale of records requests to exponentially increase over the next few years. At the same time, we've got to deal with tighter budgetary constraints. I'd like to explore a closed-loop first-round AI research assistant that combs through internal data to help provide first-pass OPRA results. In this instance, manpower could be recommitted to redactions and manual second-layer review, which would preserve the integrity of personally identifiable information (PII) and other sensitive material.

What would be your hiring process for the city of Hoboken both for the mayor's office and the city at large?

Meritocratic, with preference for a proven track record of success in Hoboken or a similar location.

Non-Partisan Representation

Recognizing the November election is a non-partisan municipal race, how would you ensure that your administration represents the interests and concerns of all residents, regardless of political affiliation?

I've spent the last year talking to residents of every political stripe. They are all welcome at my town halls, they are all welcome to book office hours with me, and they are each given the same time and consideration of someone who might disagree with them. I was elected independently

and without riding the coattails of any mayoral candidate, and that has allowed me to side with different “factions” within Hoboken depending on my authentic views. I am pro-cannabis and pro-affordable housing. I also want to hire more police. The beauty of nonpartisan elections is we can use common sense and not partisan-code every issue.

I said it in my announcement video: “Democrat, Republican, and everything in between, Team Russo welcomes you with open ears, open hearts, and open arms.” Our campaign is conducting outreach agnostic to party affiliation, and we seek support from every single Hoboken voter. My message will not change. Period.

City Focus

What would be the primary scope of your focus as mayor, and how would you balance addressing national issues like climate and immigration with the more immediate, localized needs of Hoboken residents?

Hoboken first, always. I remember how Governor Whitman worked with my father to get the waterfront we all enjoy a reality. I know how our human services teams here and in Hudson County are also staring down the barrel of funding cuts. There’s a reason our elections are nonpartisan, it’s so partners all across government can foster relationships and better work together.

Our community has a recognized need for more recreational opportunities, including the potential for a public swimming pool. What is your plan for evaluating and addressing this need?

I was the first to propose and visualize a new aquatic center on the waterfront. It’s something residents have been begging for for years, and I’ll develop a finance plan in the first 100 days that relies on public/private partnerships, grants, and revenue-generating components to get the job done with minimal tax impact. All we’ll need to be concerned with is the debt service.

Addressing the persistent problem of rodents is a top concern for many residents. What is your long-term plan to tackle this issue, and what metrics will you use to measure the success of city services?

For years I have proposed bold solutions to our rat problem—for example, mandating that parklets and streateries have removable decking so that rats do not move in underneath and live there rent-free with an infinite food supply. The other members of the City Council (some who are current candidates for mayor) have fought me on this, going so far as to vote yes on my proposals on first reading and then introducing a softer measure two weeks later and voting against my bill on second reading so they could take credit. Additionally, making parklet permits seasonal instead of annual would facilitate more frequent upkeep and allow restaurant owners to make the decisions that are simultaneously advantageous to them and in the interest of safety and cleanliness.

Unfortunately, cynicism, half measures, and political games won't rid us of the rats...and hours of public comment at Council meetings have been spent on residents begging for change. One of my running mates even found a rat skull on the ground last month, and complaints are still pouring in.

In my first 100 days I'll vigorously pursue my original plan and double down on not only clearing nests through the health department, but proactively informing our residents on where the nest clearings are happening.

Cannabis

What are your thoughts on the city's current plan for six cannabis dispensaries? How would you characterize the rollout process to date, and what is your position on public marijuana use within city limits?

I have been the most pro-cannabis member of the Hoboken City Council. As someone with a medical background, I am the only mayoral candidate that has seen firsthand in his career what cannabis can do for people with chronic illness. Hoboken voters supported the legalization referendum 4-to-1. That said, I know there are differing views on how cannabis can present quality-of-life issues within our city. We still have laws about needing to purchase securely within a dispensary, we still have laws against cannabis usage in parks, and I know that people don't want their entire city to smell like weed. I view the rollout process as mostly smooth so far with the exception of the draconian lawsuit against Blue Violets and its supporters on the City Council (who are also candidate for mayor), and when I asked the police department directly about how many calls for service we got regarding dispensaries or anyone potentially loitering outside of them, the answer we got was that the only calls were for employees mistakenly entering the whole codes on their alarm systems. We have candy stores in town that don't have that kind of spotless record.

I was proud to roll out our process as the first chair of the Hoboken Cannabis Review Board. Now I think the market and the state need to do their thing; we clearly still have a problem with people smoking while driving and that is begging for a market solution. In any event, these issues are less severe than throwing people in prison for what they choose to do with their bodies.

Environment

The previous administration spent a significant amount of time and money on legal action against companies regarding environmental issues. Do you plan to follow in the same footsteps, and what is your overall approach to environmental policy for Hoboken?

It is absolutely the case that certain companies have gotten away with the mass pollution of our communities for decades. I believe they should be held accountable. However, I also believe that lawsuits should not be funded by the taxpayers. Both can be true at the same time. Obviously it's good for residents if their government helps mitigate flooding and ensures clean water and air. I also recognize that this issue goes far beyond Hoboken and commit to working with our higher-level legislators to create long-term climate solutions that reduce the individual financial burden on our municipality.

Commercial Revival

What is your strategy for promoting commercial revitalization and supporting local business throughout the city?

More parking, smarter traffic patterns, a refocused HBA that doesn't send hundreds of thousands of dollars out of town, a Hop service that helps people spend money locally, digitizing documents required for new businesses to open, and hosting roundtables with business owners as Mayor.

Additional comments or anything that you would like to add

Thank you for taking the time to read!