

Jersey City will be choosing a new mayor come Nov. 4, 2025.

Jersey City Mamas and Narra Collective were the first to gather all mayoral candidates and help local residents, especially parents and caregivers, get a closer look at what they envision for the city.

Gabrielle Gannon and Francesca Larson, the moderator of the candidate forum, asked four questions to each candidate. For a deeper dive into their thoughts, stances and vision, you can read through the full transcript below and navigate through the sections using the document tabs on the left side.

This transcript has been edited for clarity and brevity. For the full livestream, you can click [here](#).

OPENING STATEMENTS

Gabrielle Gannon:

Let's get started. Mussab, you have the honor of having an A last name. So you are on deck, friend.

Mussab Ali:

Alright. You know this happened to me in school too. Whenever you start with an A last name, they always call you up first.

So my name is Mussab Ali. As Gabby mentioned, I'm the former president of the Jersey City Board of Education. And I wanna start by telling you a little bit about myself. My family immigrated in this country when I was three years old from Pakistan in search of the American Dream. My father, his first job was actually working at Newark Airport.

On Sept. 11, he had a job and on Sept. 12, he lost his job just because he had the most common name in the world: Mohamed. So I grew up in Jersey City going to public schools. My mom is a union teacher. My dad ended up working at the postal service. I'm the proud son of two union parents.

And you know, my parents really emphasized how important it was for me to get a really excellent education. I went to P.S. 6 then Academy 1 [Middle School] and McNair Academic High School. And when I graduated high school, I got a full scholarship to go to college. Now, as soon as I graduated from high school when I was 19 years old, is when I first ran for office on the Jersey City Board of Education. And many people thought it was a crazy thing to do. But the reason I did it is because I recognized that the most important question a city should be asking is what are we doing for the next generation of people who are living here? And for me, I saw that for so many of my classmates, they were being left behind and that there was so much more that we could do to invest in their futures.

If you look back at my conversations, even back in 2017 and 2018 when I was a teenager, I was talking about tax maintenance. I was talking about S2, I was talking about what was coming for the Jersey City Board of Education. Just last night, the Board of Education passed their fully funded budget. They raised taxes by \$90 million, a 16% tax increase. And this is something that's been projected for the last eight years. But somehow, instead of having a Board of Education that worked hand in hand with City Hall, we had a district that was working by itself and a city hall that said, "look, this is not our problem." And I

think the reality is what I learned from my time on the Board of Education was that in order to serve our students the best we need to recognize this is not just a district problem, this is a citywide issue.

And that the mayor's office needs to work hand in hand with the Board of Ed to make sure we have the best opportunities for our children. And so for me, you know, I think a lot about education. I know there's gonna be tons of questions about education here, so I'm gonna save a lot of remarks on that. But I also think a lot about pedestrian safety. I think about public transportation and I also think about how we at the local level have to have that resistance towards Trump. I think the mark I was making in terms of reproductive rights being under attack or education being under attack, these are all things that we can no longer trust the courts. We can no longer trust Congress. This is something we have to deal with at the local level. And so I think a lot about what does the mayor's office have the capacity to do in order to fight that. And my whole life, I've trained to be that fighter and I hope to earn your vote to continue fighting for you in City Hall. Thank you.

Jim McGreevey:

Hi, my name is Jim McGreevy. Born in Jersey City. [And] like Mussab's parents, but my grandparents came to this country from Ireland... My grandfather was a Jersey City police officer. My mom was a nurse at the old medical center and my dad worked in the railroad before he went to the United States Marine Corps. I'm blessed to come back home and to be involved in Jersey City. And I think as you'll hear from James and Billy and Mussab, I think a lot of us share the same thoughts and the same concerns. For mothers and for parents, it's obviously education... Education is something that we have to be very much concerned about, not only from a budgetary stance, but also in terms of the quality of our education.

If I can, one of the things that I see that is so critically important to education is early childhood literacy. We all understand that if a child can't read at third grade, they don't, he or she doesn't have the necessary proficiency. It can become very difficult because in fourth grade you need more reading for reading for history, for language arts, for science. And so third grade literacy is critically important. Unfortunately, if you look at the stats in terms of Jersey City schools, you'll see about 36% of the children in third grade are at age appropriate levels. When you look to eighth grade, particularly on mathematics, you'll see that only 10% of the children throughout Jersey City schools are proficient based on state standards. So I would suggest that we need to do so much more in terms of education and in terms of elementary education and secondary education.

One of the things that concerns me is when I talk to young couples, when I talk to parents, they'll say, I'm going to be here through perhaps primary school, but when I start looking at middle school, I'm gonna have to move out because I'm concerned about the quality of my children's education.

If you want a great city, you have to have great schools. And I want to be that mayor that focuses a significant amount of my time on schools, having great schools, working with city hall, working with the school district, working with collaborative organizations, listening to you, but improving the quality of our education. And I'm sure while we talk a little longer, we'll be talking about affordability. We're gonna be talking about public safety, we're gonna be talking about traffic and so many of these issues. But I think in terms of parents, as a father of two daughters, education was so critically important to me.

And if I can, I think we're at a pivotal point in terms of Jersey City's position and right now, as Mussab alluded to with SEA two where Jersey City lost \$250 million, we have to address that loss, but it can't simply be on the backs of the property taxpayers. And so I wanna be that partner that works with the school district, whether on new schools, on schools that are relevant and in close proximity to development, but also schools that prepare our children for the next generation. And again, I just wanna say thank you and I look forward to the opportunity to talk about so many other issues during the course of the evening. Thank you.

Bill O'Dea:

Good evening. I'm Bill O'Dea. In addition to being Hudson County Commissioner, I'm the executive director of a not-for-profit economic development company based out of Elizabeth, New Jersey. Now I've had the opportunity of spending my entire life in the city of Jersey City. I've seen the growth and I've seen us become the most diverse city in the country. Frankly, I'm very proud of Jersey City. And while there's room for improvement, I see our glass is half full. We need to build on our successes and recognize our failures. I believe that my decades of hands-on experience gives me the tools necessary to do that. And that's why I'm running for mayor. My commitments are more than promises. They are based on my proven record of 35 years of elected experience. I've never been afraid to take on the powers to be and I won't be shying away from that if I'm the mayor or it's standing up to the governor of the state of New Jersey to change the formula of standing up to Donald Trump.

From the insane positions he's taken and the stripping of federal dollars from the city that's going on as we speak, I'm committed to working with the public schools to make them better. Not tearing them down. I'm tired of people just tearing down on schools. The blame game needs to end from both sides, from the mayor's office and from the board of ed. And this starts with correcting a flawed formula when it comes to funding our public schools. The state of New Jersey stole \$250 million a year from our kids. How can Paterson get four times as much as we do? How can the city of Union city get almost twice as much money as we do? How can West New York get more state school aid than we do? I'm gonna read you a quote: "The formula punishes Jersey City for political reasons." That's not my quote.

That's the quote of State Senator Raj Mukherji made just two weeks ago. The same Raj Mukherji, who up to a couple of years ago, represented both Union City and West New York. So he knows how badly we got screwed. We all together, no matter what, our party, no matter what our age needs to come together. We need to change the formula. We need to put in place a formula that is based on the number of students that are eligible for free school lunch and special needs students that will give us back our quarter of a billion dollars we need. And once we get that, we have to make sure that the additional state aid is targeted to students in the above categories. That includes programs after school programs, opening up schools and evenings and weekends for recreation programs like when I was a kid, creating more community schools, more early childhood programs and centers for our children.

We need to build on the models we have and we need to make them more successful. We need free summer SAT classes so our young people who can't have or have parents who can't afford Princeton Review have the same opportunity to then to get into a good college or university like Mussab Ali did. We also need to make sure the city of Jersey City gets its act together when it comes to collecting payroll taxes because up to recently they haven't done a good job. Developers have gotten away without paying any payroll taxes. That's more money necessary that can go into public schools. But we also have to improve recreation in the city because that affects our young people. We have great parks [and] we have horrible parks. As a county commissioner who's in charge of the park committee, I pride myself on the fact that Lincoln Park has been in my district for 27 years and it's well maintained and it's well taken care of.

And you know what else we have in that park? Free summer camps. When I was a kid in Jersey City, we had free summer camps. I went to one in Lincoln Park this year. We have a free tennis camp, a free basketball camp, free volleyball camp, and a free soccer camp. In fact, we even had a camp for the little guys three years now up from two to five because the community and the moms in the West Side community and other parts in the city wanted it. So these are the things that we need to do. We need to work together, we need to stand together and we have to be not afraid to stand up and fight against the state of New Jersey when we need and fight against the federal government because we're all for creating more affordable housing.

I've had the opportunity to work hands-on in the construction, over 800 units of affordable housing in my job in Elizabeth, some of those units also in Jersey City. From the transitional housing for homeless vets on Ocean Avenue to a project I'm working on now with Black law enforcement service community to do 18 units of low income housing and moderate income housing on MLK, which will include their offices

for the programs they do for the young kids for P.S. 15. So working together, standing together, fighting together is something I've been committed to my entire life and something I'll be committed to with the mayor of Jersey City.

James Solomon:

Good evening. How's everyone doing? Just want to thank the JC Mamas for hosting, thank you to Narra Collective, thank you to my fellow candidates. My name's James Solomon, I'm the current Ward E councilman. Just wanna briefly introduce myself and why I'm in public service. And then talk a little bit about the vision for Jersey City.

So my journey to Jersey City starts with wife Gabby, who's all the way in the back. So we were dating long distance and she got a job in New Jersey and decided to move here. And so she came first. And so she went to a couple different towns in New Jersey to see where she wanted to live. I say this among friends. First she went to Hoboken and was like, "absolutely not under no circumstances." But then she came to Jersey City and she called me up and I was sitting in my cubicle and I like wandered out of the hall and whispered, "Gabby, what's up? Why are you calling me at work?" And just with no hesitation, some young people in the room, so I'm gonna censor. She says, "James, I bleeping love Jersey City and this is gonna be our home." And it reminded Gabby of the Brooklyn she had grown up in and we came and it became home and it became the place that we love.

But I think I didn't realize how special Jersey City was until a couple years later. So some of you know my story. In 2015, a month after we had gotten married, I was diagnosed with lymphoma. I'm blessed now to have been in remission now for nine years. And we have other folks on the stage here who have that same blessing. And I had to think as I went through that diagnosis, what I wanted with my life. And there were really two things that I wanted to use that second chance for.

It was family and service. So after we got better, we started on the family piece and left. I have our three daughters, Camilla Corrine and Noelle, and a few of you in this room see me at drop off before I had coffee. So I apologize for anything I may say or do before caffeine is in my system. And then we were blessed to have service. So I get to serve our incredible city on the city council in Jersey City. And when I ran in 2017, I really wanted to do service differently than too often it's been done. An example of how do you do public service the right way? So I made two promises. The first was not to take donations from Jersey City developers. Not because development is inherently wrong, but because too often the city has been poorly served by pay and play politics that allow developers to get what they want and not the community to get what it needs.

And then the second was to remain independent from the Hudson County political machine because too often that machine knows how to serve itself. And then you saw on Commissioner O'Dea's statistics, some of the ways that it does that, but does not serve our broader community. And I've been proud to stay true to those promises and hopefully deliver a model that shows you that you don't have to choose between effective and ethical public service that you can deliver both. A couple of the things I'm most proud of that directly relate to what we're talking about tonight. First is working extraordinarily hard to deliver payroll tax revenue to fund our public schools without harming our taxpayers. We did an audit and we found a significant lack of payment from large corporations in Jersey City. We called some of those corporations out from social media and we're able to increase collections this year compared to last year by over \$40 million.

\$40 million that has helped our public schools this year. Second, when I ran [my focus] was pedestrian safety all throughout Jersey City. Every parent I know has had a close call on the streets of Jersey City. If you've walked the streets early, you have seen people run stop signs, seen people run red lights, and it's simply not acceptable. When starting in 2017, there wasn't a single protected bike lane in the city. There was no intersection safety, basically mechanisms. And most of the streets downtown didn't have safety improvements. So we're proud that we've done safety improvements on pretty much every major street: Grand [Street], Jersey [Avenue], Columbus [Street], Greene [Street and] Washington [Street]. But we

also know that it's not enough and that we must have real traffic enforcement to make our streets truly safe. And then the last was to try to create broader statewide reform. So we help perform our state ballot to create a fair ballot and not let the political machine handpick their candidates.

But I think all of us are running because we know it's not enough, right? Jersey City is at this crucial moment, whereas rents rise and as property taxes rise and as full performance isn't where it needs to be, the future in the dream of Jersey City is at risk. And I know so many families and so many parents that are thinking about whether they can stay, whether they're born and raised or they moved here two years ago, if property taxes increase another 60%, again, can you afford to stay? If the local public school [inaudible] or you don't win the lottery to a charter school or to a magnet high school, are you going to stay? And so for me, running is about making sure that we are a city of families that are rooted and not a city that is transient, where people are here for a couple years and then off to the next stop.

And I think there are a number of ways to do that. But a couple of those core commitments. The first is to be a partner in public schools with our public schools from the mayor's office. I'll contrast with the current mayor. The current mayor too often washes his hands of the public schools and says, they are not my responsibility. That is the wrong approach. And education is the single most important thing in our city. And as mayor, you have to take ownership of it. You can't say, "well, I don't elect the board, not my problem." The second thing is to ensure that our public schools are both well funded and well governed. So to ensure that I'm working to make sure our schools get the resources they need, but also ensure that those who lead have a real vision for strong public schools. And then the third is to make Jersey City a place that's affordable, that families can afford to stay with stabilized property taxes, more affordable homes, and strong protections for tax. That's the Jersey City I want my daughters to grow up in. And thanks to Jersey City that all the folks in this room want for their families. So thank you all so much for having me. I'm excited to get to the Q&A.

FIRST Q&A

Francesca Larson: What's your approach to policy making that actively considers and reduces the burden on families and caregivers? How will you ensure that your administration uses every issue through the lens of how it affects those holding their families together?

Jim McGreevey:

Great question. And again, I just want to say thank you. Public policy or just sort of setting a course for the community for Jersey City requires all of us to be part of that vision. And so, you know, I previously served as mayor of Woodbridge Township for 10 years and in government, and part of it is also asking people to join, to be part of those discussions. There are a couple simple areas. One is I had town meetings literally every month. And so I would ask people to come in, I would bring all of the directors before them. I'd ask people to share their questions, their concerns, their criticisms, their ideas. So the first thing I think, which is critically important, is to be accessible, to be out there in the community, to be listening to people.

And as important as having your directors to be responsive so they understand, we were here last month and now we're back again and that pipe hasn't been addressed, or that curb cut hasn't been taken care of. Or for example, that pedestrian safety concern hasn't been addressed. So the first thing I think is important is accessibility. Accessibility and transparency being out in the community. The second thing that for me is having a clear goal of what we wanna accomplish. And my dad used to say all the time, plan your work and work your plan. And so, what I think is important is whether we're talking about education, whether we're talking about affordability and pedestrian safety. Public safety is to have a clear delineation of what it is that we want to accomplish and have people share those ideas and, and sometimes even debate those

ideas, but to be part of the solution, and then literally to set forth timeframes in which we're gonna accomplish those ends.

So when you say that, how do we ensure that mothers, how do we ensure that families are part of the process? At the end of the day, I think all of the individuals up here and Council President Watterman are here to serve you, to serve the community. But it is also about how we develop plans. How do we execute plans, and how do we ensure that those plans will follow through? So again, it's town meetings, it is accessibility, it's setting forth clear metrics and ensuring when we meet those metrics and then going back to the community and saying, "okay, this is what we are able to do. This is what we were not able to do. Let's discuss this further." So for me, I say one of the great joys is having been mayor and having been in state government, I think this is the level of government that's most engaging.

You can change people's lives, you can provide better schools, you can provide safer communities. But at the end of the day, it is whether or not people are engaged to serve on boards, to be volunteers. And my commitment to all of you is that directors will return your call. I mean, my sense is, and I know this is, I'm careful about painting with a broad brush, but people are frustrated that city hall isn't always responsive to your needs. If people have a concern, if people have a complaint, they can't always get a response on a timely basis. Part of what I believe is to understand that the citizen is our client. We're in the service business, and to the degree possible, we want to be that. And let me just say, to pivot back to one other question is on property taxes. On property taxes, what we heard time and time again, literally four years ago, Jersey City had the highest property tax increase in the state of New Jersey. And I think part of listening carefully is what I hear is about affordability on the property tax side, on the rent side. And one of my commitments the same way I did it when as mayor of the township of Woodbridge, is to control costs. And lastly, have the financial discipline to live within our means. Thank you.

Bill O'Dea:

I'll try to keep my answers short in my opening statement... So it starts with this 201-332-1187, it's my cell number. I give it to everybody. I have one cell phone... So I'm always available, I'm always accessible. I walk my neighborhoods. I walk to the supermarket, I walk to the park. People call me, text me. If there's a problem, you come to me. That's where the buck starts. Yes, we always reach out to the community. I'm a huge believer that policies are formed by talking to the people that are influenced by it. Why is there a camp now for two and three and four year olds in soccer in Lincoln Park?

Because the moms contacted Danielle and said, we need to have a program. That's what public service is supposed to do. They're supposed to be available for you. They're supposed to be accessible to you, and they're supposed to listen to what you have to say. I'm a problem solver. But when you solve problems, you need to talk to experts. So if it's affordable housing, I work with people that are experts in that. If it's early childcare and the fact that we need more early childcare facilities, I'm not sure why we haven't put them in more development projects that got built. But those are the things that we have to do. I believe that decisions are not made in the vacuum. That some of the best programs that we've ever had that I've ever been involved in, never came from my thoughts. It came from the thoughts of the community.

So talk to people that know me. 27 years, I've been on the commissioner board eight years. I was a city councilman. One thing, and this is not because I like you James, but when I go to a council meeting and they let the public speak and no one responds to 'em, that drives me crazy. If you ever come to a county commissioner meeting and speak, you'll hear me respond to you because I learned from what you have to say. And in order to make change, we have to be able to have a dialogue and an interaction. So when it comes to policy, I'm there. We are there. If the director doesn't respond to you, you call my cell.

James Solomon:

I concur with both Jim and Bill's remarks on the importance of accessibility. This is a very friendly group and I wanna add that Francesca was making about the importance of knowing that every policy you set

affects caregivers in the city. And there's a couple ways to ensure that that's sort of an ethos of the government. You know, one is to make sure your teams look like the city that you represent. I've been deeply proud of my chiefs of staff [who are] all my graduates of NJCU. We have folks of different ages of different ethnicities and different religions and the people that surround you have to help advise its first piece. Second piece is that you need not just to listen, but to actively seek out voices. And knowing that if you're static in doing that, you may only hear from voices that are more likely to speak up. So one of the things that I've tried to do as a council person is proactively schedule meetings with community groups across my district.

So, meet with all the PTAs... and go in and make sure that you are actively seeking out opinions that you otherwise might not have gotten. And then to make sure that those policies ultimately are implemented in ways that respect the extraordinary demands that our society is putting on caregivers throughout this modern society in 2025. So that looks like ensuring example of the thing that we did. This is something that that number of folks on this stage advocated for, but particularly Commissioner O'Dea, who we put in place a fee to enter our summer pools that had never been done ever in Jersey City before. And it made it less accessible. And so they were put in place [we] voted against it, but we lost the vote. They were in place for a year. Didn't make any sense. So we brought it back and we repealed that. So I think that's the type of concrete policy to try to make city services more accessible by listening and being active in the community.

Mussab Ali:

I think Jim, Bill and James answered, but I think I do have a little bit of a different perspective on this. So I think accessibility is really important. I like what Bill said, but I'm gonna say a little bit differently. Brian Stevenson has this great quote where he says, "those closest to the pain should be closest to the power," right? And I think so often the people who are dealing with the problems on a day to day basis, like those are the people that are gonna have the solution, right? Because when you see a problem day after day, you're thinking about, look, how do I solve this problem? Versus when it comes in front of our offices and our desk, we just see the facts. We see certain perspectives and we're forced to make a decision.

And I wanna say some ways that I've actually worked to do that even when I was running on the board of education. So when I ran, one of the biggest things that I was fighting for was students' voices to represent because the same way that the city's providing services to all the residents, the schools are providing service to all the students. The first bill that I passed was to get a student representative to sit on the board of education. So now every year, a high school junior gets elected to sit on the Jersey City Board of Education. That bill, Gov. Murphy actually took and made a statewide model. So now every single school district across the state now has that as, as, as a part of the part of the district. But the second thing that I did is, a lot of times there are parents and there are young people who aren't able to go out to these meetings

They're not able to go to city hall. They're not able to go to the town halls, right? I mean, you think about the demands that we have in our time on a day to day basis. How are you reaching out to people and, and having included in the process so that maybe there's like a blind spot that you have that you're not able to reach. So for us, what we did is when, when I was the president of the Board of education, we allocated \$100,000. We gave \$10,000 to each high school... And I went to the students directly and I said, this is a participatory budgeting project. Where would you want to spend the money? Eight high schools. And I remember adults pushing back saying, look, these kids are gonna vote for a trip to Disneyland. They're gonna want game consoles. Do you know what every single student, every single high school student said was to fix our bathrooms? And I want you to think about that for a second. I've served on this board for several years. There have been several parents that come to the board meetings. There have been several teachers that have come to our board meetings, administration, superintendents and yet no one was talking about this issue. And yet when we asked the young people themselves, they said, look, I have

this money. You can tell me where it goes. They would say to us, look, our doors are broken. We don't have soap in our bathrooms. There's no toilet paper. We don't have period products. Water fountains, I mean, that's been one of the big things that we've been working on. But I say that to say, sometimes you have to get a little creative to reach the people who don't necessarily understand the power that they have.

And I think particularly in Jersey City, I mean, I love this room because you guys are all super engaged. But when we look at voter turnout for our election, if we hit 25% voter turnout, I'm gonna be impressed. But the reality is that means that 75% of registered voters are not involved in the process and half the city's not been registered to vote. This is a city that's 41% foreign born. And so you have all these immigrant parents and immigrant moms, people who are not involved in that process. And I think we have to think as elected officials, not only how are we reaching out to groups like yourselves and moms that are here, but how are we reaching out to those people who don't even realize that they have a voice and they have power? Thank you.

SECOND Q&A

Francesca Larson: How will your administration meet this moment of instability, of uncertainty? And if you were mayor right now, what would you be saying and what would you be doing?

Bill O'Dea:

So if I was mayor today, I'd be doing what I'm doing as the County Commissioner. Stand up to Donald Trump. Tell him to stop doing what he's doing to us. Stand up for our immigrants. Stand up for our LGBT community because those are the things we need to do. You know, when I was a commissioner and Trump was there the first time, I was one of the only two commissioners who voted against extending the ICE contract. Not only did I vote against extending the ICE contract, putting ICE individuals in our county corrections facility, but also what I did is I made that meeting go to two o'clock in the morning. Because when the chairman ran out, because he didn't want to hear the people talk after it got voted through, I kept five other members there. You know what happened to me? He stripped me of my vice chairmanship and they threw me off the public safety committee. And I wear that as a badge of honor. I never bragged about it. I never complained about it, but that's what I did. And as mayor of the city, I'll do the same thing. If I'm not gonna be afraid for Trump to threaten to take our money away because you can't let somebody hold us hostage.

James Solomon:

In September and October of this year, we knew what was possibly coming. They had a president who is bent on dictatorial power, who gains power by harming others, who targets communities for his own benefit, particularly LGBTQ community [and] immigrant communities that he was trying to regain power. So the first thing was, I didn't just talk about it. We went to Pennsylvania, we organized people, we knocked on doors. I brought my daughter down and we knocked on doors together because even though she's young, this is the country she's inherited. And I am so deeply worried that Donald Trump is trying to ensure that my kids do not grow up in a democracy. So it is my job as a citizen and then as an elected official to do everything in my power to stop that from happening and not just talk about it, but put words into action.

I was proud of the stand with Commissioner O'Dea fighting ICE in 2018 and 2019 and suffered different consequences, but similar from the political machine. You have my firm commitment when Donald Trump tries to blackmail us to turn JCPD into an ICE deportation force. My answer will be hell no. And we will use every tool in our book to push back, but know that he's hurting us now. He has taken \$2 million of already approved grants away using environmental justice grants that we're gonna plant trees

on MLK, that we're gonna support teens and teen wilderness that support our immigrant and veteran communities. That type of pain is already being felt. And so as a councilman, we're gonna do everything in our power to fight back against him. And as mayor, I will do everything in my power to fight back against him.

Mussab Ali:

Yeah, I think echoing the points, Bill and James made, I have a very distinct memory of Trump, which is in 2016 when he was running for office. He only has one point about Jersey City. I don't know if people in this room remember this, but he talked about thousands and thousands of people cheering on the rooftops of Jersey City, New Jersey during 9/11. And that was what motivated me to run for office the first time. The fact that this guy can run for office and talk about our hometown like that. But I wanna say, this is the city that's the home of Ellis Island. It's the city that's home of the Statue of Liberty. We need to stand up for our immigrant community that's here, right? I mentioned that statistic earlier. 41% of Jersey City residents are foreign born.

You have to just think about what's racing through their minds. I was at a rally recently about a couple weeks ago. We were speaking out against ICE and the deportations that were happening at that same rally four years ago, we maybe had 500 people this time, we had 50 people. And I think that so many people are scared because Trump is saying to them, "if you speak out, if you exercise your First Amendment rights on a whole host of issues, we're gonna deport you. We're gonna suppress you." But, I think it's so important for us to organize because I remember post 9/11 [in] America, the Muslim community was under surveillance. And because of that surveillance, there was this chilling effect where we felt like we didn't have a right to speak out. But I say to you today, the best way to fight back against that [inaudible] surveillance is to organize, to mobilize, and to make sure we have each other's back. Thank you.

Jim McGreevey:

When I came out being being gay, it was obviously a significant moment in my life and for the life of my family. But the one thing that crystallized so powerfully for me was that as a middle aged, white, straight guy was governor with all the [inaudible] privileges. And in one conversation later, back then, didn't have the right to marry, [there was] a question of adoption, a question of living will and so many other issues. So on a gut human level, I understand and I'm grateful for an understanding of the importance of civil liberties and rights in this country and how they can be at federal [level]. For me, in terms of my day job, what I do with the New Jersey Reentry Corps, we have 27,000 people that are coming back home from prison.

[They're] coming home from jail, coming home from addiction treatments and veterans and obviously by virtue of the people I work with particularly in terms of immigrant communities that are court involved, they have struggles. And what I'm proud of, the fact of what we do is that we provide quality services to those individuals every single day. And whether it is we work to provide healthcare, we connect people to housing and particularly children in terms of healthcare inoculations and vaccinations, it's so critically important. So for me, when we discuss these issues, what touches my heart deeply is to continue to provide services to people who yearn for those services. And that's my commitment to do what I do every single day. In terms of New Jersey Reentry Corporation, if I can, I'd encourage you to go to our website, www.njreentry.org under Spiritual Latino [NJRC Espiritu Latino] and look at the services we provide for families, which to my mind provides real tangible services that makes their lives better. Thank you.

THIRD Q&A

Francesca Larson: Assuming no additional funding from state or federal resources, what specific actual steps will you take as mayor to address Jersey City's housing affordability crisis? Please detail the policies you would implement the timeline for these initiatives and how you would ensure accountability and measurable outcomes right there.

James Solomon:

If you're doing your job in public service in Jersey City well you are hearing about housing every single day. You have people who are being abused by landlords. You have people who cannot find an affordable unit. You have folks who believe that the increase in property tax is gonna push the United State. So you have to have actionable plans to address. So a couple of things that I am committed to doing. The first is to mandate no state or federal extra funds 20% affordable housing in large scale projects in Jersey City. It's the only way with all the development that's happening that if we do not mandate it in new projects, we will not get them. The second is to have the strongest tenant protections in the country. We passed a Right To Counsel bill in 2023.

It is going to be paid for largely by a fee on market rate development. And that was is going to start this year, and it'll be fully implemented in 2026. But we are also going to significantly improve the funding and the manpower in our landlord tenant office. And then three, we need to make sure the people who serve Jersey City can live in Jersey City. And so we have a plan to take abandoned lots and vacant lots and work with the [inaudible] and turn them into workforce housing so that teachers, firefighters, doctors, nurses can have affordable workforce housing. That's rent-to-own.

Mussab Ali:

I actually wanna throw another specific out there that I think is really interesting. From 2018 to now, 55% of renters in Jersey City have had to move out of Jersey City. So when you think about who is from Jersey City, I mean like the majority of those people have actually already been pushed out. I mean, that is the extent of the affordability crisis that we're facing in this city. I think there's a couple of things that we need to do. I think the number one thing we need to do is address this massive amount of demand that's here. And I wanna say very clearly, it's not just demand because Jersey's a great place to live. We've also induced demand, right? And the reason the way we've done that is Jersey City has gone on a campaign, this whole Jersey "Make It Yours" campaign. We spent millions of dollars marketing the city in a very distinct sort of way for a very distinct type of residents.

And I'm not saying it's a bad thing for Jersey City to grow. I mean, again, this is the home of Ellis Island. We love new people being part of the city, but what so many people are feeling is they're feeling left behind and they're feeling squeezed. They see all these new houses, these new developments happening, and they feel like they're not a part of the wealth creation that's happening, that they don't feel like they're benefiting from the new development that's taking place. And I would say, look, part of the solution though is we have to build more housing, but different types of housing. Right now all we're building is luxury rentals. And the problem with luxury rentals is that developers have one incentive. And that's to these REITs [Real Estate Investment Trust] and these mutual funds to make sure that they're making as much profit as possible.

The other thing we need to do is actually make it easier for people to build. There's a whole new movement on the left in politics, people that are following, and the abundance mindset, which is that we have created too many regulations and now the cost of people holding onto that land gets passed on to the eventual homeowners or the renters, right? So if some of the landlords owning a property for one year and can't develop on it, that eventual cost can be carried over and in position on the renter or on the person who's eventually gonna own the home. So we need to make it easier on the regulatory side as well. And the third thing we need to do is also make sure that enforcement is a really big priority of the city. I think

we see this both in terms of traffic, but also in terms of housing. When you talk about code inspectors, when you talk about people making sure that bad landlords are held accountable. So often I hear stories from housing courts where people are going in with landlords that have mold that are not providing [inaudible]. I know Commissioner O'Dea has done something about this as well, and there's no one holding them accountable. And we need to make sure that bad landlords are held accountable. Thank you.

Jim McGreevey:

By the way, I agree with James and Mussab, but we just share one area that it's really problematic is enforcement. To pick up on what Mussab said, you know, I was going door to door.

And they literally moved his wrap. So I went to him, I went to his home and then he showed me literally bugs and flies that were all over his home, his apartment. And he basically shared how time after time he had asked the landlord to do something about it and nothing had been done for me. That's a moral outrage. And I happen to be a renter. For me, what I think is so important, and I just differ with James in this one point, I want strong tenant rights advocates in City Hall. I want an office of tenant rights advocates in City Hall that when somebody comes and when they have a complaint, when they have a concern, it is going to be evaluated, it is going to be reviewed, and City Hall is going to help protect those individuals. I think that's essential so that it's not just an attorney.

Well, that may be so, so helpful. But it is having a unit right within City Hall that's assigned responsibility of 10 advocates. Second is obviously we have to do more as James said, in terms of the 20% in terms of affordable housing, but we also have to do more about affordable housing and workforce housing. This is critically important because middle class and lower working class families are being driven out of Jersey City. And until we have incentives, and I know sometimes that's an awkward word, but I think there is no harm in having incentives when people are building affordable housing, workforce housing and senior housing. I remember being at a town meeting with a woman. She was in her early 90s and somebody said to her, well, "your house is worth so much more. Your house is worth so much more."

And she said, at the end of the day, "I don't want to sell my house. I want to die in my house." And so we need to understand that for the working poor, for working families, for affordability, we have to provide partnerships. And one of the areas that if you look at the Nehemiah Projects in the Bronx, if you look at, if you look at Rev. Flake and Harlem, there are so many good projects because the two most expensive components that Bill all knows is the cost of land and the cost of labor. And if we provide the right incentives, we can drive down that cost to provide greater affordability to Jersey City families and renters. Thank you.

Bill O'Dea:

So I lived this every day, 96 Duncan Avenue, no heat for two months. Myself and Joel Gross went into that building. And then four days had the city declare an emergency repair of the boiler. 1113 [on] different avenue. Just two months ago, no electricity in the building for five days. We went there on a Saturday. No one was there fixing the electrical service. You know who I called? The commissioner of the DCA. She had an inspector there that day. The next morning I showed up, the electrician was there working. You know what he said to me, if the FBI comes, I don't care. But when the DCA calls, I listen. So every day I live this, every day I help people in the gang evicted from their buildings. And while the city's starting there Right To Counsel, before that, I stood up, sponsored and got the county to fund Right To Counsel because we couldn't wait.

No disrespect to Jersey City. We couldn't wait for the money to be collected to get it started. So that's my experience. Every day I've opened up my office sometimes for a person to stay in because they got thrown out of the apartment that they were in. And it took me that long to be able to get them a hotel room or a place someone I support the 20%. I was the first person to save the 20% on John Highness's show. And I'm glad everybody else has come up on board with that. I also support five to 10% for workforce

housing. The difference between me and everybody else up here is I actually do this. I've done this for a living. I'm currently working, like I stated earlier, on writing affordable housing trust fund application to the state of New Jersey for an 18 unit project on Martin Luther King Drive.

I'm working. And I saw Katie Brennan here earlier with Family Promise [of Hudson County], with the Jersey City development to find a location. We're working on trying to find locations for housing for women who are victims of domestic violence because we can't send them to hotels because the risk if something happened to them is there... But if you're gonna do 20% affordable, if you're gonna do 5% workforce, the Aspire [\[New Jersey Aspire Program Act\]](#) works. I worked on the Aspire legislation, Trenton, when it got adopted, we can create those units. But here's what we need to do. You also need to look at, as James said, every vacant lot in the city, every vacant building in the city. Don't let them go up to the highest bidder, but let them be committed to developing affordable housing.

And my last point on this, which doesn't really cost any money, is I believe we should allow upzoning of properties owned by faith-based organizations, if they're willing to put community space and a 100% affordable housing. There are a lot of lots owned by mosques, churches, synagogues. And if we work with them, and I've met with a lot of 'em to allow 'em to go four stories instead of two stories, we can create a lot more affordable housing units. And in creating those affordable housing units, we know that we've got faith based organizations there to help provide the services that those units also need. Thank you.

FOURTH Q&A

Francesca Larson: If elected mayor, what is your long-term plan? Not just for temporary fixes, but for real lasting change over the next decade to make Jersey City Schools excellent. Specifically, how will you ensure budget transparency and accountability? How will you build a productive solutions-focused relationship with the Board of Education? How will you guarantee that all students, including those with special needs, have the access to the resources and opportunities they deserve and that are equal to all other students? And finally, how will you personally lead on this issue instead of passing responsibility off to others?

Mussab Ali:

I'm the one who's here who served on the Jersey City Board of Education, and I can tell you it is a really tough job. For those guys that don't know the Board of Education members do not get paid. It's completely volunteer responsibility. And the president of the Board of Education is probably a 35 to 40 hour a week commitment. I always get kudos to people who run for the Board of Education. I see some here who've run as well as people who serve on that board. I would say, look, I look at my own story and I think about what went right to put me in the position that I was in. So I went to P.S. 6, I was selected to a magnet middle school at Academy One, and then I went off to McNair Academic.

And I always tell this story about my four teammates at our mock trial team, the four of us, two of us ended up at Harvard Law School, one at Yale Law School, and one at Harvard Medical School. These are public school outcomes. So it is possible that you can be from the Jersey City Public School system and make it. And now the big question becomes, if that's happening at McNair, how do we make that happen at the rest of our schools? And I think the biggest thing that's missing is providing wraparound services for our students, but also changing the mentality of a lot of our schools. I'm going to be frankly honest with you, a lot of our students are set up to fail. They go into high school and the expectation is just that they're gonna get a GDP, that they're not gonna go on and achieve higher education, that they're not gonna go on and be successful in their careers.

And so they sort of live up to that expectation. They say, okay, "I'm gonna get the GED. That's what's meant for me. I'm gonna end up back in my community." And I think what we need to do is make sure

students have opportunities when they're freshmen, when they're sophomores, when they're juniors, to explore outside of just what's possible in the realm of Jersey City. One of the things I was a beneficiary of was the Jersey Summer Internship program that existed back when I was in high school. It went away after the pandemic, but it gave students in Jersey City an opportunity to intern with some of the largest companies here in Jersey City. I had some friends that interned with JP Morgan that are investment bankers today. I had some friends that interned with NJCU. I mean, we have a thriving corporate team that exists here in Jersey City that we do not take advantage of.

Why don't we work with our corporate citizens to make sure there are pipelines that exist, especially now as college degrees are becoming less and less valued. As you think about the Chat GPT and AI it is less and less reasonable to force every single child to go off to college. We need to be building pipelines for them to go directly into the workforce right here in Jersey City. Another statistic I'll throw out for you, only 17% of people who live in Jersey City, work in Jersey City that is significantly lower than somewhere in neighborhood towns in Newark. That's up to 25%. And so you have this opportunity in Jersey City where the jobs are here, they're created here, and yet our people are not getting access to 'em. And so when we think about accountability and holding myself accountable in terms of a decade, what that looks like for me is that a child in Jersey City who starts in the public school system knows that they will have an opportunity to have a good paying job right here at home in Jersey City and then they'll be able to afford to live in the same city that they grew up in. Thank you.

Jim McGreevey:

I think Mussab's experience is unique and obviously, bless you... I think far more typical is when parents are grappling to figure out, all right, might my child has gone through pre-K, my child's in elementary school. What am I gonna do for middle school? What am I gonna do for high school? Am I gonna get them into McNair? Can I get them into County Prep? And it sounds like some sort of post apocalyptic ball trying to navigate the school systems. The folks that I work with on the completely on the other side of the spectrum, I mean, frankly, my family happens to be from Clark Street in Greenville and the schools, many of those schools don't work. And so what I see, what's so critically important is that we work.

And my commitment, this to me is one of my core reasons for running for mayor. I want to work with the school district, but I want to require the school district and they ought to require City Hall to be accountable. And we have to do certain basics. Well, first we have to get more money into the classroom and out of, candidly, administration, the money needs to be driven into the classroom. Second, we need to understand the importance of quality pre-K. Quality pre-K is essential... whether it's learning sounds, whether it's understanding letters, whether understanding the basics of mathematics. Everything demonstrates that quality pre-K helps to launch a child successfully. Third is early childhood literacy.

We have to make Jersey City the most literate city in America, which I think is so incredibly important. And then we can talk about whether to go back to the South point, whether middle school, whether we go to block scheduling, et cetera, whether we look at alternatives, say, go back to vocational education with what I do in, with NJ Reentry Corp, would provide lessons in HVAC, Phlebotomy, electric, et cetera, to some of those job professions for individuals not seeking to go into college.

But I think as mayor, I would meet literally weekly with the Board of Education. I would set benchmarks of accountability, whether on teacher recruitment, whether on curriculum, whether on designing and planning for schools, whether downtown or throughout all of Jersey City. I mean, one of the things that it sounds to me is the fact that we have development and we have development not necessarily with schools in mind, not necessarily with communities in mind, that shows the lack of reciprocity of cooperative engagement. So to me, I want to work with the school system, I want to say clear benchmarks of accountability. But at the end of the day, regardless of what zip code you live in, that child should have access to a quality education. And at the end of four years, let alone tenure years, I want to come back to you and say, this is how Jersey City's metrics have been approved on language arts, on mathematics and

science, and how we are creating a more competitive academic environment for our children, for every child. Thank you.

Bill O'Dea:

So the first thing we need to do is all have the courage to stand up to Gov. Murphy and change the formula because unless you have the money to do the things you're talking about, they're not gonna get done. And you are right parts of the city, we have teachers looking to go teaching and parts of our city that can't wait to get out of those schools. And that's unacceptable. And one of the things we need to do is stop letting those teachers that are good teachers just transfer to a school that they think is an easier place to teach. I already work with the Board of Ed. I don't need to wait till I'm the mayor of Jersey City to work with the Board of Ed. I talk to 'em, I work with them. We are working on getting schools in development.

Bayfront will have a new school, the SDA and the Board of Ed and I have had conversations about taking the via parking lot, which is owned by the SDA and turning it into a pre-K to fourth grade with workforce for home ownership. Ultimately co-op housing above. So some of us are doing that right now. Here's the reality. We gotta put more money in. And yes, we need to make sure that we get rid of the bureaucracy at the top. We need to do that in city government. You probably need to do it in your nonprofit and my nonprofit, but we also need to make sure that we respect the teachers that we have. Right now, we are fighting to get new teachers. It's not easy like it once was. There's competition. There are city bank bonuses for people who become teachers. So we have to be willing to spend that money and not be afraid to do it.

How do you hold me accountable? Hold me accountable in the fact that each and every day I'll be working with one school or another, I'll be making sure that whatever resources they need, and I'm gonna incorporate the importance of working with parents. We've got a great set of parents here today. When I leave here today, I'm gonna go make sure my sixth grade, 11-year-old grandson did his homework. And if he needs help with his homework, I'm gonna make sure I'm there to help him. And everybody here probably does that all the time. But you need to realize how many parents that are out there for whatever their situation in life is, aren't able to do it. And we as elected officials have an obligation to make sure that those young men and young women get those services. It's not enough to talk about it, it's not enough to talk about metrics.

We need to use nonprofits that we have. We need to engage the educators. We have to make sure that all of these young students have the same opportunity that people that have well educated parents are able to give to their students. It's why we started an SAT prep course in County Prep many years ago, because we needed to make sure that those young people in Lincoln and Snyder whose parents couldn't afford to pay for Princeton Review, had the same chance to get a good SAT score to get into a good college or university. Those are the things we do.

At the end of the day, I look at a public servant this way. Our first and foremost obligation is to be the voice whose voices can't be heard on their own to speak to those who aren't able to speak for themselves. For the single mom who just survives day to day, who might be a victim of domestic violence and can't give two seconds to help her son or daughter do their homework or get ready for a test. It is gonna take time. It's gonna take money. But at the end of the day, hold me accountable. Not in 10 years, but in four years for putting in place whatever infrastructure is necessary to make sure that every child, that every student has an equal ability to do their homework, to study, and get an opportunity to advance to the next group.

James Solomon:

So I'm in your hypothetical, I'm gonna have a 17, 15 and 13-year-old in my house. So the hair's gonna be all the way down by that point, but they are at Jersey City Public Schools. And so for me, the standard that I want for my children and for every single child in the city is that you are in the best urban school

district in America. That is the standard. And anything less than that means we're not doing good enough for Jersey City. So a couple of things that over 10 years have to improve significantly is investments in parent engagement in schools. Talk about why that can be so difficult. But it's not the district and the city to do that, right? To ensure that parents have opportunities to engage in schools, knowing all the challenges and obstacles to that.

Significant investments in curricular education, that Governor [inaudible] that is crucial to ensuring that we have the best public schools investments as discussed in efforts for high school kids in the jobs program that Jersey City had to create opportunities. And then I think the crucial thing that hasn't been discussed, but investments in the higher education space in Jersey City. We have three institutions of higher education. We have NJCU, we have St. Peter's, and we have Hudson County Community College. Those institutions of higher education are crucial, crucial, crucial to the people of Jersey City having opportunities. I know so many of my students I've taught at each of those three schools, have used those schools while they were working one or two other jobs to create the starts of their careers and to pursue their dreams in two, often City Hall has completely ignored those institutions.

... So for me, there's gonna be an extraordinary commitment from pre-K through higher education. And so that accountability piece is crucial. So in 10 years, the goal should be everyone in this room should be able to say, Jersey City Public Schools are on track to be or are the best public schools in a city in the country.

Speaker 2: (21:44)

Thank you. So we're, we're about to wrap up. And at first I want to say thank you to everybody who participated tonight for having a conversation and not a debate. Maybe she was running

ENDING COMMENTS

Francesca Larson: What do you love about Jersey City? [And] we want to give you an extra minute to tackle anything that you feel like you missed or wanted to respond to or something really important about your belief system or how you would lead that, we shouldn't walk out of here today without knowing.

Jim McGreevey:

What I love about Jersey City, I love about Jersey City is the people, the richness, the diversity, the strength. I just wanna share two things that I didn't hit hard enough on. So we stopped talking about meeting with students. I met with students and I met with others. Two things I just wanna share with you quick. One is I met students who had a cascade of substitute teachers the entire year, literally substitute, substitute, substitute, substitute, substitute. They did not have a teacher for the entire year and it is a national crisis. So I want to be clear, it's not the sole purview of the Jersey City Board of Education, but that is fundamentally wrong.

Second, I met with a group and I've seen a lot of hard things in my life, but I met with a group of mothers, single mothers, as Billy alluded to, who had children that have learning disabilities. I will tell you, it was among the worst conversations I have ever heard in my life with mothers sharing how the IEP, and this wasn't one mother, the solution was to keep that child back in a classroom for another year. And so what I see is when we are talking about the educational system, and I know we could do more with the city, we could do more with parents, but we have to do more with the school system. I was with my friend Brandy, and we were in Monumental Baptist church where grandmother shared and she didn't have access to the internet. And her child, her grandson didn't have books because they solely used the iPad.

So she couldn't share the experience of literacy, the experience of reading with her child. So if you look at those three data points, one is substitute, substitute, substitute. That reality. If you look at IDP and you look at not having books or access to technology in order to launch a student, what I see is I see systemic challenges. And I'm honest this isn't about castigating blame. We have to, as Billy said, we have to move past that. But we have to recognize what we're spending. \$1.1 billion, we're spending \$37,000 per child. And so my point is we need to do better and we need to recognize the elephant in the room. And there are great teachers in Jersey City, there are teachers in Jersey City that take money out of their wallets every single week to augment their classes. But at the end of the day, I've also talked to teachers, some of the best teachers that are bluntly afraid of not towing the longing.

If we're gonna create excellence, we're gonna have to be bold. We're gonna have to establish clear metrics, and we're gonna have to get it done. And look, I recognize life. I don't have a lot of virtues, but I work hard. And this to me is one of the most passionate reasons for running for mayor. That every child, wherever they live in whatever home, whatever part of the city, they have access to a great education. And it has been done in other cities for, frankly cities, of lower socioeconomic class than Jersey City. But it's been done of having a clear game plan where teachers, the school district are accountable to you. City Hall works cooperatively and we engage in the community to do something so basic. It's to make sure that our children are better positioned than ourselves. Thank you.

Bill O'Dea:

So a couple of things. First, there are a couple of groups of students and young people that weren't really spoken about today. I sat in a panel discussion a couple of weeks ago with parents of children on the spectrum of autism. And back in the day, Sue Mac took up a course for her son. If you saw him today, you'd be amazed. But since she left the board, they've gone backwards. And we need to change that. And we need to stand up for that. The same way we need to stand up to make sure that parents who have adult children and adults with autism have a place every day for those young men and young women to go to because we don't have that now. And Council President Joyce Watterman didn't make it here tonight, but she was on that panel and we are committed to find that location.

Secondly, we really need to think about those children on the southern end of the city who don't have the programs they need now. And we need to stand up for the Black women enforcement serving community, the PAL, the Boys and Girls Club, because if we don't support those organizations, they are the lifelines. They are the lifelines for those 10, 11, 12, 13 year olds that are there. But we also can't say our school system's horrible. Three weeks ago I was at NJCU going to an event where a local nonprofit gives gowns and tuxedos to high school students who can't afford them on their own to go to a prom. And I accidentally walked into this big room and it was Jersey City Schools putting on music performances. And it was amazing. Those grammar school students and high school students and what they did there were amazing. And that showed me that we could do that in every school.

And we shouldn't want that for every school. And we should want to have great schools and we have to work for that. And we have to call out the Board of Ed when they're wrong. But we have to work with them too. So at the end of the day, I think that we've gotta make sure that each and every day we do something, we do something to help a child, to help a student, whether it's someone in your neighborhood or whether it's somewhere else. Because that's where it starts with having a 11-year-old grandson and watching him go through COVID and look at the learning loss that he still deals with today. I can't afford every summer to send him to St. Peter's University to catch up on his dream. And he's still a little behind on his reading. But I wonder each and every day how many other children there are in Jersey City whose parents can't afford to send 'em to that state program.

So those are the things that we need to do, stand up for our children, stand up for all the good things in our school system because there are a lot, a lot of good things in our school system. And if we give credit to them, if we give praise to them, we can help move all the other teachers, all the other educators, all the other components of our school system to make them better. And you know what else we need to do? And

I see here in the back of the room, Sandra Robinson Green mom in 1972, Robinson versus Kagan, thorough and efficient education. That's where it all started. And you know where she's working today and we're working on today, because we can't forget them, we also have young men and women that are incarcerated that are juveniles. They don't get any education at all. And if we fail to educate those young men and young women while they're incarcerated, guess where they're gonna end up in a state correctional facility. So we started discussions... It bothers me if you're an adult, it's a correctional facility if you're a juvenile, it's a detention facility. But to make sure that they also have an ability to get a thorough beneficial education.

James Solomon:

So first, let me just start with thank yous again. So Jersey City Mamas, thank you. Thank you everyone who's volunteering and thank you again, fellow candidates. What I love about Jersey City is basically every incredible moment in my life has been here. My three daughters were born at Jersey City Medical Center. This was the city that helped me recover from cancer. I remember my friends Debbie and Sharon at Gia Gelato. I'd walk in every day and it was a free cup of coffee to help me keep my spirits up. My friend Joel Mafa would take me on walks in Liberty State Park just to keep that energy going during the toughest time in my life. And that ability of having your back in a really tough moment is a story that I have. It's a story that everybody who's been in Jersey City has had.

And it is why we're choosing to raise our children here, why they're at public school and why we think being raised in Jersey City is going to make them the best kids that they could ever possibly be. And running for mayor is about ensuring that that is true for every single family here. And so we talked about a whole host of things today, and it would be the honor of my lifetime to get to be mayor and work every single day to turn those from vision into reality. To have the single best public schools in the city, in the country to ensure that every single parent and their children can cross a street safely to build more affordable homes in the next four years than we did in the previous 10. And to have the strongest tenant protections of any place in the country.

None of those things are outside the realm of the possible. All of them are things that can be done if the city partners with institutions locally and at the state. And if city hall is focused each and every day on you, and not on powerful real estate developers or political machine bosses, or the people that too often prevent the city government from doing the job that you hire it to do. And so my commitment is to do that for every single person in this room, every single person in the city. And one thing I do have to ask, I do ask for your vote on Nov. 4 in 2025 because I was told don't get anything if you don't ask for it. So I'm asking for it today. And if I haven't earned it today, I will try to earn it each and every day until you go to the voting booths on Nov. 4.

Mussab Ali:

So I think the start of this question is what do I love so much about Jersey City? And I think Jersey City is the most incredible city in the world. I don't say that halfheartedly. I mean, I think James's story about Jersey City having your back is something I think so many people can relate to. And I think for me, what I really want to double down on is I look at my fellow candidates on the stage and I'm a lot younger than some of the people who are here, but the reason I wanna talk about that is I remember when I was running, when I was a young person... You know, experience is a good thing, right? But I think the thing that I really wanted to emphasize was, I remember when I was elected as the president of the Board of Education at 23 years old, and two weeks into my term, I was actually diagnosed with Stage 4 cancer.

The same cancer that James had. You know, it's a funny coincidence that we're both up with, we actually went to the same hospital as well, the same exact chemotherapy treatment, it was a clinical trial and then I was in my second phase of that.

I just think there's some kind of destiny in that. But when I was building up my career, you know, as someone who was 23 years old, I built my career as someone who had no change of memory. To be so young and to be in politics meant that I always did my homework. I always knew what was going on. I always understood the numbers. And I remember when I was diagnosed with cancer for the first time in my life that I had this massive hole. And I wasn't quite sure how people would respond. And the thing that is so incredible about this city that I don't think you'll find anywhere else is that people will always support you.

And so for me, my story is an American story that can only happen in the city. For someone to be an immigrant, to grow up into public schools, to represent them, to be elected as the president. I mean, that is only something that can happen in this city. And it completely changed my life. And I wanna emphasize when it comes to some of the tough battles that you have to fight, I remember going through chemotherapy and I remember fighting about teachers' wages, right? I remember the wage at the time was \$54,000. And then when I went to the teacher's unit, I said, "look, we want to increase. We want to increase teacher wages, they want to increase 'em all the way at the top, right?" They said, "look, yeah, what about the teachers that have been here 20 years?" And I said, look, we can't focus on those teachers.

We have to fight [for] the teachers at the bottom. And we increased their minimum wage from \$54,000 to \$61,000. That was in 2021. It is almost still at that same level today in terms of reopening our schools right in the middle of the pandemic. While facing stage four cancer, while being in my first year of Harvard Law School, we had to figure out how to deal with an unprecedented public health crisis. How do we work with the governor's office to change the executive order so that teachers could get vaccinated? How do we work at the mayor's office to get vaccines for our teachers? And how do we make sure our teachers are ready to reopen the schools and have the sort of tele-education so that people who are at home could also learn? And I say that to say, this city is a city where anything is possible, where someone who has grown up in the city, has gone to public schools, can sit here before you and ask you for your vote to be the next mayor of this town. And the most incredible thing I have about this campaign is not just meeting with parents, but it's meeting with young people and inspiring 'em to believe that you can be someone from the city, that you can go to schools here, that you can be educated here, and then one day you can leave here. Thank you.

Francesca Larson: Thank you all for joining us. Thank you for your words. We appreciate it. Thank you all for joining us tonight. No more talking from us. It's your turn.

For the full livestream, you can click [here](#).