



Campaign for Parks 2021 Mayoral Candidate Questionnaire

Candidate: At-large Boston City Councilor Michelle Wu

1. What Boston park or open space do you visit most often?

We're most often at Fallon Field in Roslindale, where my two boys love the very tall blue and yellow slide at the playground. We also love to explore in the Sherrin Woods urban wild, which is always captivating because we run into deer and hawks regularly.

2. Do you have a connection to a community garden? Which one?

The history and present of community gardens in Boston has informed how I understand community and civic power. Urban farming has always been about more than just producing food. As the founders of Boston Urban Gardeners famously noted, "because urban gardening is so empowering, it is inherently political." In Boston, agriculture has functioned as a response to systemic disinvestment in Black and Latinx neighborhoods, dating back to the community-led effort in the 1970s to reimagine the Southwest Corridor following the successful fight to block the construction of an eight lane highway cutting through Roxbury, Mission Hill, and Jamaica Plain. Though I don't have my own community garden plot, I have loved my time visiting community gardens around Boston and speaking with urban farmers about how the garden serves as an oasis from urban life, a hub for community, and a connection to culture and heritage.

3. What park-related goals would your administration set to support your vision of a healthy, resilient, and beautiful City?

Investing in Boston's parks and open spaces is an investment in the health of communities and in climate justice. We must ensure all residents have access to natural spaces that build ecosystem resilience while improving public health.

On the City Council, I've led the charge with Councilor Bok to create an Urban Conservation Corps, taking inspiration from the original New Deal's Conservation Corps, to train young people in climate-related mitigation and resilience work and

close employment inequities across neighborhoods and racial lines. As Mayor, I'll prioritize the creation and support of a Conservation Corps to complement our popular summer youth jobs program with year-round employment and training and wrap-around supports, including for youth who have been involved in the criminal justice system and those working on their GED. A trained Conservation Corps would provide much-needed support to Boston's parks and to the many nonprofit and community organizations that support them, from educating neighbors on sustainable land use, to planting and maintaining our urban tree canopy, to installing green infrastructure like rain gardens and permeable pavements, to restoring wildlands and wetlands.

As Mayor, I'll also invest in expanding and protecting Boston's urban tree canopy. Urban forests provide shade and protect against heat waves, mitigate exposure to air pollutants, and improve our mental health, while also sequestering carbon in the soil. We need a comprehensive urban forest strategy to coordinate the complex factors affecting tree retention, growth, management and health – beginning with the ongoing urban forestry master plan to establish priority planting zones that can focus Parks and Recreation Department planting efforts on the areas of highest need while continuing to maintain and care for existing trees citywide. We'll also explore additional funding for priority planting zones through the state's Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness Program, which can be applied to urban forestry initiatives, setting aside funding for education and maintenance programs run by community partners. Through deeper collaboration between the Parks and Recreation Department and arts organizations, we'll activate these priority planting zones as green spaces using culturally appropriate public art and interactive features to draw in existing neighbors, and through ongoing community engagement for public education on tree planting and maintenance over the long term. Our urban forestry master plan must also be fully integrated with our broader planning and development processes by requiring that any private development or reconstruction occurring within the priority planting zones contribute either to the growth and maintenance of the area's tree canopy and heat island reduction through tree planting, rooftop planting, permeable pavement or other suitable adaptations.

Finally, I'll focus resources on growing urban agriculture in Boston as an investment in racial justice, climate justice, and economic justice. Urban farms and community gardens are particularly important in Black, Latinx, and low-income communities where residents have less access to private outdoor spaces or well established public parks than in white neighborhoods. One 2012 study found that census tracts with a higher Black population have lower access to community gardens, and existing community gardens often have long waiting lists, preventing immigrants and other newcomers from participating. Urban agriculture can help Boston residents access nutritious, affordable foods year-round, while also facilitating community engagement and ownership over our food systems. As Mayor, I will expand the spaces available for community gardens with an explicit racial justice lens to ensure all Boston residents have the opportunity to grow their own food and preserve

cultural traditions around food production, including by bringing land into food production by using tax incentives or vacant lot registry fees to encourage private landowners to transfer non-buildable vacant lots to aspiring farmers, with a preference for Community Land Trusts and other organizational structures that ensure the permanent community control of land. We'll also lower the barriers to entry for new and aspiring farmers by subsidizing the installation of new water connections and the procurement of technical assistance and by providing soil testing and remediation services through a newly created Urban Climate Corps, which can also teach regenerative agricultural practices to build environmental stewardship among Boston's youth.

4. How will you increase access to parks and open space in our residential neighborhoods?

Through zoning and land use regulations, cities determine access to parks and open space both directly, and indirectly – through neighborhood density, diversity and affordability of housing options, placement of other public amenities such as transit and pedestrian infrastructure, and location of businesses, industry, and environmental hazards. As the City looks to create a zoning code rooted in climate justice and resilience, it must embrace that each and every new project is an opportunity to expand and enhance existing parks and open spaces. When large tracts of land are up for sale and redevelopment, zoning and land use decisions create a generational opportunity to build vibrant, resilient communities. We need to abandon our piecemeal approach to development approvals by building a new public planning department that can fully integrate our need for parks and open space into our planning and development processes.

In addition to its parks, Boston is responsible for ensuring that other public assets support community health and well being. Boston can integrate open space and green infrastructure into schools facilities, public housing, municipal buildings, libraries, roads, and sidewalks. When we invest in resilient public infrastructure in our neighborhoods, we are shaping the health, well-being and prosperity of the people who rely on them. Our education agenda lays out a Green New Deal for Boston Public Schools, which proposes that every BPS facility include outdoor space, including athletic facilities, playgrounds, and open green space for students' and community members' use, and a school garden to give every student the opportunity to connect with nature, grow food and other plants, and experience real-world applications of their science curriculum. When space is not immediately available on-site, BPS must work to ensure that school communities have full use of nearby public space for safe outdoor recreation. All of Boston's youth at every single school deserve access to the many benefits that parks and open space have been demonstrated to offer, from increased self-esteem to communication and teamwork skills, community integration, youth leadership, academic performance, and healthy behaviors.

5. Equity has important implications for every aspect of city life. How would you define equity with respect to the city's parks and greenspaces?

The foundation of our [Boston Green New Deal](#) is that climate justice is racial and economic justice. BIPOC communities, working-class families, and immigrant communities are more likely to live near environmental hazards and face exposure to pollution, urban heat island effect, flooding, and other climate change impacts. While parks and greenspace are often within walking distance for residents, Boston ranks in the bottom of major U.S. cities in the amount of greenspace per resident—the city in fact has twice as much roadway per resident as greenspace. Living in proximity to trees and greenspace has been shown to enhance physical activity, reduce obesity rates, mitigate exposure to air pollutants, improve pregnancy outcomes, reduce cardiovascular disease prevalence, decrease mortality, and have a positive impact on mental health. We must act with urgency to ensure that all Bostonians are able to experience the benefits of parks and greenspaces. We must also intertwine investments in parks and open spaces with community stabilization, creation of green jobs for the future, and closing the racial wealth gap. People must be able to benefit from green investments in their neighborhoods without fear of displacement.

6. The current Boston Parks Dept operating budget is 0.75% of the city operating budget. Would you commit to raising it to 1%? On a per capita basis Boston spends between 1/3 and 1/2 of what Seattle and San Francisco spend on parks. How can Boston increase the pie so that a substantial increase in the park budget will not come at the expense of other vital city services?

I commit to significantly increasing the resources dedicated through the city's operating and capital budgets to the creation of parks, open space, and green infrastructure which are so critical to community health and climate justice. I will assess the overall budget context in partnership with community organizations and residents to ensure that we have a holistic plan for our communities' needs that elevates the centrality of parks and open space.

There is no clearer statement of values and priorities than the way a community allocates its resources. We must transform our city and ground our economic recovery in public health, justice, and equity. Investment in parks can amplify commitments to racial justice and economic justice. By building an urban conservation corps to train the next generation of arborists, we can move away from contracting these services out and move towards building a sustainable career path for Boston residents, creating opportunity for BIPOC youth while also investing in Boston's urban tree canopy.