



# Michele Braniff For Ward 3

## Question 1:

Over the last two and half years it feels as if we have become a less compassionate and caring community and are seeing increased incidences of racism, Islamophobia, homophobia, transphobia and sexual and gender-based violence, not only in the broader community but in our schools. If elected, what are steps you would take or policies you would propose/support to begin addressing this troubling trend?

- Hate, harassment, discrimination, disrespect are symptoms of deeply troubling problems and what is required is transformation in our culture – in schools, the city and the wider culture. The challenge is complex: this is not a simple problem easily “fixed” by a recipe; nor a complicated project like building a rocket ship with a team of experts. The relatively new field of social innovation provides insight into complex social problems (such as this one), which are like raising a child, which requires the whole village.
- I currently teach college courses about social justice and change and I have over fifteen years of experience in mental health (including front line, supervisory and management roles). There is considerable research in this area: culture changes slowly over generations, beginning with clear and accountable civil rights laws and policies, modelling and mentoring by leaders, teachers, coaches and other significant adults and often by intergenerational discussions in homes where children and youth bring new perspectives from school and the community to start to soften old habits, assumptions and biases of parents and grandparents.
- I had the privilege of participating in citizen advisory committees for the Stronger Together initiative in November, 2018 which explored ways to help the City to be more welcoming and accessible, especially for residents from vulnerable or minority groups. Part of that initiative included Unconscious Bias Awareness training and this type of training needs to be offered regularly and periodically across the city and especially to new Councillors, Trustees and employees. The recent apology and comments by the Woolwich Councillor about rainbow crosswalks is an example about why education is necessary.
- As Councillor, I would continue my advocacy and ensure open communication with citizens, advocacy groups and their allies, staff and other Councillors to ensure the City policies and training programs are regularly reviewed and updated to match current research for effective strategies to educate and facilitate a welcoming environment. There are also opportunities for education through City web-sites and communication to consistently send a message of kindness, respect and radical hospitality.



## Question 2:

What is one decision made by Cambridge/Regional Council in the last four years that you believe has had the most impact on the lives of women and gender-diverse individuals? What more would you like to see?

- I had some involvement as an Ally in the campaign to bring free menstrual products into City and school washrooms. In my role as a graphic facilitator, I worked with a local advocacy group on this issue. Talking about free menstrual products publicly helps remove the stigma of menstruation and also highlights issues of inequitable distribution of wealth, privilege, Intersectionality and Gender. Intersectionality is about recognizing the multiplier impact of overlapping social locations, such as being a woman with a disability in a lower income bracket. I see Council's decision on menstrual products as a small starting point to open the door for greater openness, recognition and understanding about stigma and ways to be more welcoming. It is also part of the context to make sure we have welcoming, safe and equitable washroom facilities that do not marginalize on the basis of gender identity. I think this discussion needs to continue for continuous improvement and for safer public spaces for everyone.

## Question 3:

Data from neighbouring municipalities and cities across the globe show that Consumption and Treatment Services (CTS) reduce the risk of overdose and drug poisoning. Waterloo Region currently ranks as having the eight highest rate of overdose deaths in Ontario. This is a crisis and punitive "war on drugs" models of managing it have failed time and again, causing countless preventable deaths. If elected, are you prepared to support a CTS in Cambridge as it has been proposed and agreed to by Council? Please explain your rationale.

- The CTS site is a public health strategy which I support completely. Medical, scientific research quite clearly demonstrates that the "war on drugs" is misguided in treating a health crisis with a criminal law response. Often media, police and city, provincial and national leaders talk about Opioid Overdoses. There is growing evidence that many of these deaths are not an intentional overdose but rather the result of contamination or inadvertent self-administration of substances like fentanyl. Most of the deaths attributed to overdose of drugs are more accurately, death by poisoning. This is a very complex problem and one that was ignored for decades until it became a crisis. As early as 2016, the Waterloo Region Crime Prevention Council had issued warnings in a detailed report about the increasing urgency and likely deepening of the opioid crisis.
- There is significant evidence that Consumption and Treatment Services sites save lives: early intervention after poisoning is crucial. And, no less importantly, CTS sites provide an opportunity for trusting relationships to develop with the CTS team so that when a person seeking addiction treatment is ready, a trusting therapeutic relationship is in place. Waitlists are very dangerous for addiction services where timing is everything.
- The City of Cambridge needs to continue to invest in evidence-based responses to the Opioid Crisis, like the CTS site, because this is a significant public health issue.



#### Question 4:

From children to seniors, adults and couples, people across the community are facing mild to severe mental health challenges. We have heard many stories of people not being able to access the mental health supports they need. From community counselling to crisis and residential supports, organisations and institutions are lacking the resources to meet the community need (<https://www.cambridgetoday.ca/local-news/cmha-still-seeing-high-demand-for-mental-health-supports-5559717>), and waiting lists are significant. Why do you believe this to be the situation, and if elected, what will you do in your capacity to support the mental health needs of the community?

- Much of my professional training and work experience is in the field of mental health services. In addition to teaching Social Service Worker courses as a college professor and my experience at the front-line and management in the mental health field, I helped design Health Connect Counselling Partners as a collaboration between six counselling agencies to provide mental health counselling and treatment services to the patients of primary care physicians.
- There is extensive research connecting mental and physical health and the urgency of developing a health care system which supports preventative health measures in a treatment model to support resilience. Our current services fail as a system because it is disconnected with many gaps and mostly focuses on crisis response. Decreased funding at federal and provincial levels over decades has eroded the system and there have been recent pressures like the climate crisis, shortages of medical professionals and the pandemic.
- Although mental health is mostly outside of the jurisdiction of the city, there is a role that municipalities can play, both with respect to advocacy to other levels of government and with respect to prevention and the facilitation of citizen wellness and resilience. There is research that community programs for recreational and sports activities and green spaces like city parks and tree-lined streets can create conditions to help people connect, mitigate social isolation and reduce stress. Food security and housing are also matters within municipal jurisdiction which directly impact resilience and both physical and mental health.
- In recent years, there has been a new approach to urban planning at the municipal level which considers social impact (such as recreational & sports facilities, parks, housing and food security services) during planning and design. Developers traditionally talk to city officials about direct financial costs, economic benefits, environmental impact and local stakeholder support. When social impact is integrated into urban planning at the design stage, a City becomes a better place to live with improved sustainability and resilience for the residents, neighbourhoods and the City. City planners need to always consider impact on wellness and mental health at the design level. I would integrate design criteria and evaluation of policies and development applying the Canadian Index of Well-being and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.



## Question 5:

More than 5,500 individuals living in Cambridge visited the Food Bank this year for emergency food assistance. Of those, 1,200 individuals accessed the food bank for the first time in their lives. What will you do to ensure that no one in our community goes hungry?

- Food Banks were designed to be a short term crisis intervention. The Cambridge Food Bank has excellent programming in addition to offering food and contributes to community development. Food Security is about inequity and poorly designed income support systems. The long term solution for poverty is a living wage. Bills S-233 and C-223 for Unconditional Basic Income are not yet law and I encourage people to sign the petition. Cambridge can advocate with other municipalities for changes at the federal level and for a more realistic adjustment to the Ontario Disabilities Support Act.
- As Ward 3 Councillor, I would also take action at the municipal level. Many years ago, Opportunities 2000 formed as a coalition of government, corporate and non-profit organizations with the naïve goal of ending poverty in Waterloo Region by the year 2000. This has not happened yet. The coalition offered research into poverty among the working poor. Precarious employment is more widespread now than 25 years ago. The City, both as an employer and in its contracts can strengthen and continue its policy for living wages for staff. When I was a manager at Lutherwood, we tried to move staff from short term to full time employment so that we intentionally built our staffing model to offer as much income security as possible.
- I like the idea of the community working together and we can be much more sophisticated because we can apply the decades of research about poverty. For example, we could do a city wide dashboard tracking how we are doing on the Canadian Index of Well-being and especially with respect to issues like food security.
- In the interim, as we try to implement long term policies to reverse decades of short-sighted policies, I would continue to advocate and support the work of the Cambridge Food Bank and other organizations working for food security.



## Question 6:

An unprecedented number of people are experiencing homelessness, either accessing shelter or living unsheltered. This is happening across the country, and we know that no one level of government can fix this issue.

What will you:

- do, in your capacity, to support the people currently experiencing homelessness?
- do, in your capacity, to ensure that everyone has access to affordable housing?

- The homelessness crisis developed over decades of inadequate funding at the federal and provincial levels and the lack of cohesive policies. The National Housing Policy is a ten year plan that has not yet been fully implemented. We do not yet have a provincial housing policy. Responsibility for affordable housing and for social services has devolved from higher levels of government to the municipalities. The long term solution for homelessness is affordable housing so that everyone has a place to call home.
- With respect to homelessness, The City policies and programs need to be developed with input from people with lived experience. Current emergency shelters are overcrowded and must be adequately funded. We need separate and dedicated emergency shelters for youth; currently youth from Cambridge either seek shelter across the 401 or at The Bridges. We need social supports in the form of trained staff (child and youth workers, social service workers, social workers, addiction and mental health workers) available because being homeless is stressful and the transition to housing is too important and too difficult to leave vulnerable people alone to cope with all the challenges. Often, people who are homeless have suffered trauma, mental health challenges and / or addiction. Remember the story of Million Dollar Murray? Malcolm Gladwell focused attention on Murray Barr and the million dollars spent in ten years by the city of Reno for a series of interventions like emergency room visits and police calls. It is actually more efficient and less costly to support people out of homelessness!
- We need to have relationships with the people who are homeless and the programming and funding to make sure these professional relationships include system navigation and treatment as required. Emergency shelter, by definition, is a crisis intervention and so people do not create their home in a shelter; they merely have a place to sleep and perhaps some meals. It is important to make sure people transition as quickly as responsively, with support, to long term housing so that everyone has a place to call home.
- Municipalities can negotiate together for increased federal and provincial investment and Cambridge can collaborate with the Region of Waterloo and local housing organizations and businesses to maximize success for housing investment in the City. We can integrate social impact considerations about affordable housing when developers approach the City Planning department to order to facilitate business investment / participation in affordable housing units. In addition, affordable housing can be maximized with social innovation in programming. For example, Housing First ensures social supports for the most vulnerable people for long-term success. Another promising social innovation are Land Trusts which can be used to mitigate against rising property costs for affordable housing and other social programs. As many people are aware, RARE is a land trust established for ecosystem protection, research and education. Land trusts can also be used to provide cost effective locations for affordable housing and also for non-profit social services.



### Question 7:

Last year's Child and Youth Planning Table survey of the Region's youth, particularly the report with disaggregated data by municipality (<https://childrenandyouthplanningtable.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/CYPT-YIS-GEOGRAPHY-SNAPSHOT.pdf> and <https://www.cambridgetimes.ca/opinion-story/10651359-the-kids-aren-t-all-right-cambridge-youth-are-sounding-the-alarm/>) showed youth in Cambridge experiencing more significant challenges than their peers in other parts of the region. This includes lower outcomes in their sense of belonging, mental health, support from family and community, and access to recreational facilities. Youth in Cambridge have clearly identified significant issues growing up and becoming successful adults in our community. Why do you believe this is the case, and what will you do to improve child and youth wellbeing and outcomes in our community?

- The lower outcomes on Cambridge youth well-being, documented by the Child and Youth Planning Table, highlight measurable targets for improvement in services and facilities for the City of Cambridge. Results can be mapped out and I would study the report and look for ways to improve programming, recreational facilities and access to greenspaces and nature across the City but especially in neighbourhoods where the standards and well-being measures are lagging. My focus would be on developing a plan of action, based on the research with systems in place to measure progress. What the Child and Youth Planning Table is tracking measures social impact on children and youth. As described earlier, social impact needs to be integrated into City design – with respect to City planning for neighbourhoods and also programming and facilities.
- While I was a manager at Lutherwood, I participated at the Child and Youth Planning Table and as Ward 3 Councillor, I would like to return to the Planning Table. The City of Cambridge needs to base policy and decisions on evidence and research. The Child and Youth Planning Table publishes well-researched recommendations and reports with local solutions. We need to integrate this important work into Council decision-making and access the various systems for measuring progress.
- Quite recently, I had the opportunity to participate on the Youth and Older Adults Sub-Committee for the Cambridge Wellness Advisory Council. Citizen recommendations also need to be fast-tracked and prioritized for improvement of grassroots democracy.

### Question 8:

Do you have a candidate page or social media you would like to direct people to for more information?

- [bit.ly/MicheleBraniffWard3](https://bit.ly/MicheleBraniffWard3)