The Baltimore Sun is preparing its online voter guide for the upcoming election. Please answer the following policy and political and education background questions below.

We ask that responses be submitted by end of day Friday, March 13 at the latest and each response be kept to 250 words or fewer. Answers will be published in the guide as-is, and will also be used as part of our endorsement process. The Sun's editorial board will not make endorsements in every race, but all answers will be posted online.

Any questions, please let us know: kagordon@baltsun.com.

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| **Email address** | [thiruforbaltimore@gmail.com](mailto:thiruforbaltimore@gmail.com) |
| **Candidate name** | Thiru Vignarajah |
| **Facebook page**  *Please format as: https://www.facebook.com/baltimoresun* | https://www.facebook.com/thiruforbaltimore/ |
| **Twitter account**  *Please format as: https://twitter.com/baltimoresun* | https://twitter.com/thiru4baltimore |
| **Date of birth**  *Please format as 12/31/1957. We will use this to calculate ages at the date of elections. We will not post your date of birth.* | 12/18/1976 |
| **Where do you currently reside?**  *For Baltimore City residents, please provide your neighborhood. Please format as: Dundalk or Hampden, Baltimore City.* | Federal Hill, Baltimore City |
| **What is your current occupation?** | Lawyer |
| **What is your educational background?** | Edmondson Heights Elementary,  Johnnycake Middle School,  Woodlawn High,  Yale University,  Harvard Law School |
| **Previous political experience?** | Deputy Attorney General of Maryland  Chief, Major Investigations (City State’s Attorney’s Office)  Federal Prosecutor (U.S. Attorney’s Office)  Law Clerk to Justice Stephen Breyer  Law Clerk to Judge Guido Calabresi |
| **Why are you running for office?** | There is no better measure of a city’s health than whether people are coming or going, and right now people are leaving Baltimore City in droves. We’re losing families that have been here for generations, along with new residents who had planned on staying but have since reconsidered that decision. This should come as no surprise: we expect families to pay twice as much in taxes for their children to have a higher chance of getting shot on their way to a failing school with no heat or air conditioning. Because of high crime and a failing economy, there are fewer and fewer opportunities to work your way up to the middle class and obtain even a baseline expectation of safety and security.  The fate of my family was tied to the future of Baltimore from before I was born. It was 1970 when my mother came to teach math at Poly. She and my father returned a decade later fleeing civil war. My mother, who had taught at Poly, finished her career at Morgan State. My father was a lifelong high school teacher. He taught at Edmondson, Douglass, Southern, and Western, retiring as the oldest teacher in the state of Maryland at the age of 80. This was the tradition in which I was raised. A tradition of service and hard work, grit and gratitude. Baltimore gave my family a chance. I’m running to be mayor to help fix the City that saved our lives. |

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| CRIME | How do you assess the current police commissioner’s performance and the department’s approach to fighting violent crime, specifically murder? | Commissioner Harrison deserves a real opportunity to tackle crime and turn around the Baltimore Police Department. Because of the deficit of leadership in City Hall, it is premature and unfair to assess his abilities. Continuity of leadership matters, and as Mayor, I would give him a fair chance to succeed. I have publicly committed to cutting murders in half in my first term or I won’t seek reelection. I have dedicated my life to fighting crime at the city, state, and federal level. I know we can drastically reduce violent crime without mass incarceration, mandatory minimums, or cash bail.  In November, we announced a comprehensive plan to drive down violent crime with 20 strategies that Baltimore City has never undertaken. Here are two key features of that plan:  First, we will launch 12 simultaneous wiretap investigations targeting gangs and drug organizations in the City’s deadliest neighborhoods, culminating in coordinated arrests of 150-250 violent criminals. Previous use of this strategy delivered long stretches of no violence in communities from Cherry Hill to Greenmount East.  Second, we will strategically deploy additional resources to drive down crime. For example, we will encourage more federal prosecutions of carjackings, commercial robberies, and firearms violations. We will recruit 600 more police officers through a college cadet program; focus on burglaries where forensic evidence is often potent; and pursue certain murders in a newly-constituted cold case unit. We will also maintain an anonymized database of violent repeat juvenile offenders to ensure their cases are being handled appropriately. |
| SQUEEGEE KIDS | How would you address the issue of squeegee kids in the city’s intersections? | Squeegee kids have become, fairly or not, a symbol of Baltimore’s current plight. However, they are not one monolithic group. These individuals have unique motivations and needs that prompt their decision to turn to squeegeeing: those trying to provide for themselves and their families and who would leave the corners for a meaningful job with advancement opportunities; those who squeegee and are themselves struggling with addiction or mental illness or come from backgrounds impacted by substance abuse; and those who will attempt to continue squeegeeing regardless of attempts to divert them to a better path.  Each group requires a customized approach. We will ensure squeegee boys are appropriately connected with pathways to advance their education or gain secure employment with advancement opportunities. For example, we recently got two young men, Jerome and Sieed, jobs at Cinghiale and Bar Vasquez by putting them in touch with owners Tony Foreman and Cindy Wolf. Some of them are victims of addiction and need rehabilitation services. We will identify individuals struggling with addiction, mental illness, and homelessness and connect them with appropriate services. And, in cases where individuals continue to turn to squeegeeing despite meaningful options, we will deputize community liaisons to confiscate the tools of their trade.  The right combination of opportunities and disincentives is required to address these issues. But this problem must be addressed before one of the growing number of altercations between squeegee boys and commuters ends in tragedy and detonates the ticking time bomb that this issue currently represents. |
| DRUGS | What strategies would you pursue to reduce drug addiction and associated ills, such as overdose deaths and crime? | We must treat drug addiction as an illness. Too often these individuals are incarcerated and released into society, failing to address the root cause of their ills. We have proposed to implement a system like Seattle’s [Law Enforcement Diversion Programs](https://www.kingcounty.gov/depts/community-human-services/mental-health-substance-abuse/diversion-reentry-services/lead.aspx) (LEAD) which provides a credible alternative to booking individuals with behavioral health needs for low-level offenses. Instead of creating criminal barriers and penalties, LEAD diverts these individuals to community-based interventions, including housing, addiction, mental illness, and health services. |
| EDUCATION | How do you propose Baltimore pay for its expected share of the Kirwan education commission reforms? | We will fully fund Kirwan without raising property taxes; in fact, we propose cutting property taxes in half over 10 years. We are the only campaign that has specifically outlined how we will pay for Kirwan’s reforms. We have committed to becoming the first city in America to legalize and tax marijuana without federal or state approval, earmarking that money exclusively for educational priorities, universal pre-K being lead among them. We will also require casinos to contribute their fair share to enact the Kirwan recommendations, particularly since casinos were sold to the people of Maryland on the premise that they would generate revenue for public schools. |
| ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT | What are the overlooked opportunities for economic development and job creation in Baltimore, and how will you encourage their implementation? | Economic stagnation for families is the product of high crime, broken schools, transit deficits, structural racism, systematic disinvestment, and failed leadership, among other things.  In the short term we will inject $250 million immediately into the local economy, by drawing down Baltimore’s “Rainy Day Fund” and borrowing against our AA bond rating.  To create jobs with living wages that match the workforce development efforts of the community we will stimulate development in promising growth industries that would become anchors of Baltimore’s economy for the next century, including: biotech, cybersecurity, small businesses, arts & music, cannabis, culinary arts, cancer research, driverless vehicles, port logistics, and tourism & hospitality. To ensure that local residents have the skills needed to secure these jobs, we will align the priorities of public education, trade schools and community colleges as well as diversion, prison workforce and reentry programs with personnel needs of existing and emerging industries  Finally, we will invest in future generations with a $3-4 billion investment in infrastructure overhaul over the next decade, pledging to match federal stimulus funds with public-private city investments.  These are three of the twenty proposals outlined in our economic recovery plan that was called “a great vision for Baltimore” by Economist Anirban Basu of Sage Policy Group and “insightful and bold” by Maryland Public Policy Institute.  We have also pledged to cut Baltimore City’s property taxes in half in 10 years using a plan described by former WYPR President Tony Brandon as “visionary and actionable.” |
| ENVIRONMENT | Baltimore faces multiple environmental problems, from lead in school water fountains to sewage overflows to illegal dumping sites to Wheelabrator emissions. What are your environmental priorities for the city, and what steps would you take to address them? | The climate crisis must be at the forefront of Baltimore’s agenda. I want Baltimore to become a leader in the production and deployment of clean energy technologies and advanced transportation solutions to achieve net-zero carbon emissions by 2035. We will bolster the resilience of the community to extreme weather and flash flooding by making green infrastructure the centerpiece of our climate adaptation strategy. My administration will use natural defenses, like reforesting, planting rain gardens, and revegetating land to protect our communities.  We must close the Wheelabrator. A symbol of Baltimore simply cannot be a trash burner’s stack. My closure strategy will be: 1) Win the lawsuit brought by the incinerators against the Baltimore Clean Air Act; 2) Sue MDE, EPA, and the incinerators for failing to enforce pollution limits; 3) End the Wheelabrator contract next year; and 4) Negotiate or force the facility’s closure with Macquarie.  Environmental racism continues to persist in Baltimore. Polluting facilities, like the incinerator, are disproportionately sited in communities of color and contribute to the high asthma rate. This isn’t just about spending money; it’s about structural racism cloaked in land use decisions. I propose that any industrial facility or energy-generating facility require a cumulative impacts analysis and a commensurate level of sustained public outreach to monitor the impacts and provide information to the communities most affected.  It is also unacceptable that 79 years after lead paint was banned in Baltimore, we still have hundreds of children suffering from lead poisoning every year. I will require water testing across the entire city; replace all lead service lines (through a partnership with local hospitals, the state (DWSRF), and EPA); and provide filtration systems as a stop-gap for homes that need immediate relief. |
| TRANSPORTATION | What transportation strategies would you pursue to help city residents access jobs? | It is incomprehensible that in 2020 our city remains so reliant on automobiles for transit. We’re a city bereft of affordable options for transportation, particularly in communities with stagnant job growth.    As Mayor, a Day 1 priority for my administration will be to immediately expand the free bus system to provide transit options along the major East-West corridors of the city. The city's free transit system—the Charm City Circulator—is designed by Visit Baltimore (a 501c6 with municipal and corporate partners, designed specifically to market the city—not to provide public transit). We need to reform the purpose of the Circulator to specifically target riders lacking alternative transit options. Expanding free Circulator routes to East-West corridors and major arterial roadways like Pennsylvania Ave and Harford Rd. is meant to lay the groundwork for a citywide free public bus system. A free bus network could reduce commute times and make the city – and jobs – significantly more accessible.  In addition to expanding public transit, my administration will expand green transit options in the City by developing, investing in, and executing a comprehensive bike-pedestrian-scooter plan that will expand bike lanes and promote bike use. Some of these initiatives will require a cultural shift; accordingly, we will explore new and existing policies such as pursuing tax incentives for commuting bicyclists to local businesses similar to those outlined in the federal Tax Cuts and Jobs Act in 2017, and collaborating with organizations already doing great work to spur bike advocacy and ridership. |
| HOUSING | What can the city do to encourage the development of more affordable housing? | Despite nearly 17,000 vacant properties in Baltimore, access to affordable housing remains an obstacle for too many. We have put forth aggressive proposals not only to reduce the vacant housing lot, but also to expand access to affordable housing.  We will seize and sell property with excessive code violations and unpaid taxes, and transfer those properties to affordable housing organizations, thereby raising additional revenue and creating affordable housing. We will build emergency shelter housing without limitations on the duration of stay; invest and support community land trusts; remove zoning restrictions that pose barriers to new affordable housing units; enforce restrictions requiring developers to build affordable housing in high opportunity areas; and create programs to assist seniors safely and securely “aging in place” with rent protection. Revitalizing the development of affordable housing across Baltimore requires a concentrated, deliberate effort from all stakeholders. |
| TAXES | What is your view of the city’s use of tax increment financing, payments in lieu of taxes and other incentives to encourage developments like Harbor Point? | Part of the reason why investment has flowed to affluent neighborhoods, and out of neighborhoods that desperately need it, is because the City has no master plan with respect to its investment and the corrupt pay-to-play culture has rewarded developers at the expense of neighborhood residents.  We will develop a master plan for investment that will equitably guide investments and prioritize City support and resources in neighborhoods where private investment has to be encouraged instead of simply allowed. Tax incentives and TIFs, when used, should first be deployed to neighborhoods that are struggling to attract investment instead of as a tool simply to lower the cost of investments that were already going to happen. |
| NEIGHBORHOOD REVITALIZATION | What can Baltimore do to encourage commercial and residential revitalization in neighborhoods away from the waterfront? | While few incentives are needed around Baltimore’s Harbor and its accompanying waterways, City Hall could do much more to promote development in neighborhoods from Edmondson Village to Park Heights, from Cherry Hill to Oliver Street. There is not one silver bullet strategy for neighborhood revitalization it requires a confluence of investment in transit, housing, and economic growth and, in Baltimore, an actionable plan to reduce violent crime.  We have pledged to launch an office of strategic partnerships. We are fortunate to have scores of local private and social players dedicated to creating a brighter future for Baltimore. Foundations understand that City Hall could be a partner in their push for scaled impact and systems change. Community organizations and nonprofits have been tirelessly committed to their constituents, and would benefit from additional opportunities for collaboration and partnership. |
| LEADERSHIP | How will you improve efficiency and effectiveness in city government and encourage transparency and accountability in its operation? | Baltimore is a $3.5 billion failing corporation in need of a turnaround CEO. This requires leadership from the top. We need to set examples. One week after announcing my candidacy for Mayor, I released the last five years of my tax returns. I became the first-ever candidate for Mayor—to the campaign’s knowledge—to release his federal and state tax returns. With the fight against corruption at the core of my campaign, I pledge to usher in a new era of transparency and integrity, calling on all citywide candidates to disclose their income sources and tax returns.  Baltimore’s procurement process must function in the best interest of taxpayers. We must eliminate the pay-to-play culture and close relationships between City Hall decision-makers and public contract petitioners who have for too long riddled our procurement process with inefficiency, which has resulted in sub-optimal outcomes. As Mayor, I would support greater reliance on blind bidding processes that select contractors and vendors based on quality of goods and services, cost, and impact on the local economy.  Baltimore deserves to understand how their money is being spent and, in some instances, misspent. I will (1) launch a citywide forensic audit to be shared with the public within 100 days of taking office; (2) establish monthly public CitiStat, with three citywide town halls and nine town halls in each police district; and (3) hold a weekly press conference on the state of crime in Baltimore. |