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City Budget Survey a Farce

BY COMRADE PATRICK

The capitalist cabal running Des Moines decided the broad outline of next years’ budget cuts long ago. Cities of Des Moines’ size create contingency plans for budget shortfalls years in advance and begin to actualize them the moment they catch wind of cuts—in this case—a little less than a year ago. The ‘listening sessions’, public hearings, and most recently, a survey apparently designed to offend thinking people, are nothing more than counter-insurgency tools, containers in which public outrage can be safely stored away. Anyone hoping to affect where these cuts fell should have applied actual force—outside of the safe, approved channels so patronizingly laid out by the City Council—months ago.

The content of the online survey, whose results the City recently released, bears out both the extent to which the budget cuts have been decided in advance and the disdain which capitalist administrators like Scott Sanders have for the rest of us. \$6 million of the \$12 million deficit was already worked out for the respondent, which included modest trimmings of administrative and other services. Somehow, there was no option to reduce or freeze administrative salaries, many of which crack 6 digits (Sanders makes \$500,000/year in total compensation, and just got a raise). Respondents then had the option to cut the library budget, cut the parks budget, close pools, end beautification programs, and, somehow, to add another 6 police officers at a cost of \$200,000/pig. There was no option to increase the budget of any department except the Police and Fire Department. Respondents were all but compelled to make selections which included cutting essential services like parks and libraries.

Methods: From an initial set of 667 responses, we excluded 128 comments which did not express a political opinion (mostly listing a name or expressing gratitude for the survey). We also excluded from the above chart 178 responses which had some political comment but could not be aggregated into a statistically significant group ($p < .05$), many of which expressed idiosyncratic opinions or pet grievances, some of which expressed either right-wing or anti-corporate views. This left 361 relevant, codable responses ($n = 361$). Respondents were aggregated into the coded groups “Fund Libraries, Parks, and/or Pools” ($r = 98$), “Fund the Police More” ($r = 57$), “Cut Administration Salaries” ($r = 57$), “Add Revenue by Some Means” ($r = 54$), “Defund/Reduce Police Budget” ($r = 95$) on the above chart only when they clearly stated their desire for the coded preference. Respondents who expressed more than one coded preference in their comment were sorted into their most clearly stated preference.

In addition to flagrant leading questions, non-questions, and choices-on-rails, the City “survey” is host to a litany of sample biases identifiable by even the most hung over sophomore social science major. The questionnaire was distributed poorly, solicitation did not reach most people, and only 2300 of the most news-conscious in Des Moines responded - of a total population of 212,000. This poor sample size and self-selection bias is compounded by a lack of verification whatsoever. 230 (10%) of respondents acknowledged that they were not Des Moines residents, business or property owners, and there is no way of knowing how many people falsely claimed to be residents. Moreover, it is unclear why the mere fact of owning a business or investment property in the City gives that owner’s opinion the same weight as someone who actually lives here. The google forms surveys a social science major make for class assignments more sample integrity by orders of magnitude. Finally, the way in which the survey’s results were reported to and by organs of capitalist propaganda like KCCI put the lie to any possible claim of its objectivity: the fact that about a third of respondents wanted to fund the police at current levels was trumpeted, while the fact that a majority of those who answered wanted to reduce DMPD’s budget was buried. It is clear to anyone not on the City payroll that this survey was created to justify capitalist class preferences, rather than gather input from the ‘public’.

The survey nevertheless contains some interesting social commentary, despite its myriad and intentional, bad-faith flaws. Multiple-choice questionnaires like those used in this survey are subject to numerous forms of researcher bias even when not created in order to intentionally mislead the public. Open-ended questions or prompts are becoming the standard, wherever possible, in social science surveys, since they avoid many researcher biases. The City provided an option for comments at the end of its survey, in which respondents were able to express their political desires, unhindered by Scott Sanders. The City included these comments as a footnote, but we would do well to take stock of the people’s unvarnished political preferences.

We took the liberty of coding and analyzing the comments. We will provide our methods and coded dataset upon request, but essentially we divided responses into ‘cut the police budget’, ‘protect libraries/parks/pools’, ‘fund the police more’, ‘cut admin/Scott Sander’s salary’, and some version of ‘raise revenue instead of cutting anything’, while excluding comments with no political content and groups of political opinions which were small in number and fell below the threshold of statistical significance. Below are the results. To no one’s surprise but Scott Sanders, many of the most news-conscious of Des Moines residents want to cut police budgets and fund social services. ■

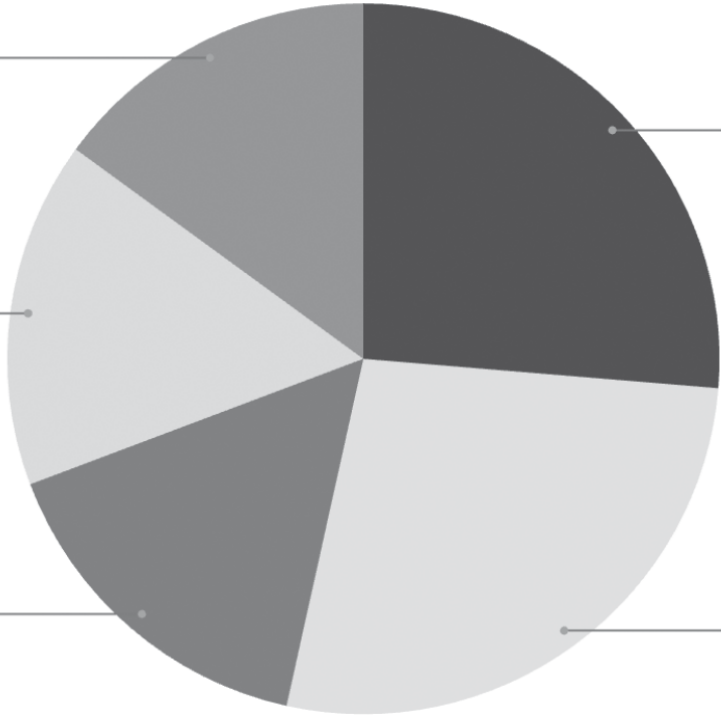
Add Revenue
15.0%

Cut Admin
15.8%

Fund Cops
15.8%

Defund Police
26.3%

Fund Parks/Lib
27.1%



The People Have Spoken

Buried in a footnote to the City’s recent sham survey are the comments respondents left. We read every single one of them, all 667. In digging through these unvarnished aspirations, we discovered kernels of folk wisdom, dried feces, nuggets of abolitionist gold, and some objects that defy categorization and even Euclidean geometry. Below are our findings:



- BEST**

“We should be able to cut even more from the police budget given how often I see them jerking off in empty parking lots.” — *Ward 4*

“There is no reason that so much of our money should go to cops who pick on our homeless and black and brown residents all while running red lights and quadruple parking.” — *Ward 4*

“The library is one of the last truly honorable, beneficial, non-corrupt places left on earth.” — *Ward 1*

“Eliminate more cops — at least 10 more. 20 would be better.” — *Ward 1*
- Unorthodox but Sound**

“Immediately stop enforcement of the 10 inch grass rule.” — *Ward 1*

“The city could make so much money if they made a live stream of the trash trucks and used the streaming revenue.” — *Ward 3*

“I wish there was a section to eliminate funding for the Kraus Soccer Field.” — *Ward 1*

“Have Law enforcement vehicle STOP IDLING all the time — I know the police will push back against this but too bad.” — *Ward 3*

“This whole thing is [OBSENITY].” — *Ward 3*

- Crank Corner:**

“Fire the good idea fairies.” — *Ward 1*

“Make sure Rob Sand is elected...he has some pretty great ideas on this very matter.” — *Ward 3*

“I live on the East Side and I call Odor Control at least 1-2x per week.” — *Ward 4*

“Mosquito need about 5 pacifies treatments per year to be effective so one is basically a waste of money.” — *Ward 3*
- WORST:**

“Not a resident but am a DMPD officer.” — *Ward 1*

“I live in Altoona.” — *Ward 2*

“I would like to see any programs geared towards senior citizens eliminated.” — *Ward 1*

“Do not provide ANY services for homeless enforce the laws they break.” — *Ward 4*

“As a cop...” — *Lives outside DSM ■*



BY COMRADE JENOTS

In 2026, every politician talks about quite clear and definite policies such as Medicare for All and the formal enshrinement of women’s reproductive rights as though they’re looking through a cloudy crystal ball, thousands of years off into the distant and uncertain future. As though their ability to enact these policies hinges on the weather in Washington DC at 11:17am, 87 years from today. As though one cannot strategize now, and has to wait until they’re elected to the battlefield to start planning their attacks.

At the end of the day, the present behavior and rhetoric of politicians both ‘left’ and ‘right’ is not that of a person who has a plan and stakes their candidacy on that plan. They don’t need to, because many of you will support them anyway. If these are issues we care about, then watching politicians who at this point no longer even bother to promise us the things they cannot achieve, should arouse some suspicion. Instead, what we get from the likes of Jacobin magazine and our ostensibly progressive neighbor down the street are yard signs, No Kings rallies, and the most naive, glazed-over idiot stare you can imagine: “well who would you vote for instead?”, “do you want X to win?”, “at least she’s trying to change things!”. The bar is not low. The bar is now a thing behind which a certain kind of person hides trembling, while wailing and accusing at everyone who does not share their voting behavior.

When Ocasio-Cortez was elected, communists pointed out that she was a reformist candidate in terms of her own stated program. Not a socialist but a kind of democrat in support of social welfare policies, with no accountability to the socialist organization that claimed responsibility for her election: the Democratic Socialists of America. Since then, Ocasio-Cortez has vacillated on basic left-wing positions on policing, ICE, imperialism, Israel, and the list goes on. Most recently she has dismissed her earlier critique of police as ‘Woke 1.0,’ as a naive iteration of her rhetorical approach, which pales against highly

Ocasio-Cortez 2028!

sophisticated positions like “vote blue no matter who!” For us, it was not necessary to live through the last 8 years in order to learn these lessons — because this behavior by progressive politicians makes up the history of the entire preceding century, not just in America but everywhere else as well. It is no surprise, nor do we need to resent her for it. Plus, now she might run for president!

The truth is, AOC does not have an obligation to you or to me, nor to her constituents, nor to the DSA, because she is not a member of any organization to which she is required or expected to be accountable. Obligations in politics are created by tangible, real leverage, and most people have none and make no effort to find any. Unlike the participants of the precarious and dangerous labor movement in the early part of the last century, many people in the present day enjoy the taste of their own tears, and take perverse delight in their own powerlessness over the politicians who have cuckolded them, including AOC. This nasty feeling adds to the appearance of politicians’ power — if AOC can pull one over on me like this, she must be quite politically powerful after all! But the sad truth is that this appearance of power is a mirage. Nothing new or exciting has happened — she has merely come under the pressures and forces of life in congress, and more specifically of the liberal faction of the capitalist class represented by the Democratic party. This is old news to any literate person — and a detailed account of the nature of this pressure can be found in Robert Brenner’s *The Paradox of Social Democracy*, as well as about a million other places.

Who you cast your vote for matters very little, though I would defend your right to do it unconditionally. Why you’re voting could say a lot about what you think the world is like, and how you think we should spend our time here. To those of you who put your faith in these politicians, in particular those of you who are literate and have the ability to read, to learn, to assimilate the varied ideas of your contemporaries, weigh them, and act on them. To those who — despite this — are waiting for the next politician to give their seal of approval to — you deserve the future you will get, and you have nothing but my contempt for your servility. It is not my goal to convince you of anything. I am writing to curse you. I am too old to say any longer that you have my patience or my friendship. You have put yourself on the side of the forces of order, of the maintenance of a system you know is not just timid, damaged, or a bit unwilling, but which is categorically incapable of giving humanity a dignified existence.

I need my daughter to live in a free world — I need it to be the case that her way of life in this country is not predicated on a mountain of other children’s bodies and a river of Palestinians’ blood. I need her right to her own body to be a permanent and enduring guarantee, not a matter of political judgment under review every few decades. If you choose to support the cretins in power for their promises despite the evidence of their lack of results, then you and I are simply doing different things for entirely different aims.

The barricades of the near future will not have just two sides where you and I will meet and I will reconcile with your cruel stupidity to face off together against a shared enemy — and at this rate you should not expect to see us together there at all. I would rather fight two enemies. If, on the other hand, you want to fight for a better world, then you must be engaged in building alternative institutions now, today, most immediately — outside and beyond electoral politics — not waiting for someone else to do it for you. No matter the shape that takes, so long as it is genuinely new, creative, free, and independent you will have my respect.

Ancient philosophers, as well as Marx, often approached ethics in terms of questions about one’s own development: Who should I be? How should I live? What do I need to do in the world in order to say that I’ve lived well? Many people have outsourced their political lives — the rich complexes of beliefs as well as activities, short term and lifelong — to whoever happens to stumble along to represent them most approximately. Americans especially are eager to tolerate poor approximations (but then, for a politician to approximate you, there would need to be a fairly well-developed ‘you’ to begin with). This attitude absolves individuals of having to develop coherent views of their own and live with the uncertainty of having convictions. It absolves them of the imperative to realize these views. After all, why would you want a coherent version of communism when you’ve already decided it’s impossible because of a movie you saw in 10th grade? Why would you need to think about those concepts more carefully and deeply when you’ve already decided there’s nothing to be found? I have no counter-argument to this — denial and ignorance are one viable way to live, at least in this world, for those who choose to live that way. But it is no way to live a good life, because it terminates in docility and indignity. It is convenient to live a life of low ethical caliber, taking refuge in the nominal values one shares with others supposedly on their “side”, and no doubt we are all busy and tired, not to mention entertained - so why not allow a politician to take your place in the political world? Who wouldn’t love an excuse to turn their back on a real future, if it permits them to leave its construction to someone else?

But the decision to absolve yourself of the responsibility to construct alternative political institutions and to be involved in their conception — yes, you must invent ones that have not even been thought of yet by anyone! — puts us at odds not just politically but ethically, down to the very soil of what it means to live well, in a way far more fundamental than anything that stands between Trump and Ocasio -Cortez or between democracy and fascism. This ethical standpoint cuts both ways: I also find this shared ethical disposition to be a bridge between myself and people whose aims and beliefs are very different from mine. To see the world this way changes what a friend is, or can be. The question of whether ordinary people can relate to each other as equals deserving of respect can be framed in many ways — and I insist that for those who want a better world for all of humankind, the bar rests at least this high. ■