Broad Range of Questions/Much Consensus

The candidates were questioned on a broad range of topics and, especially among the Democratic candidates, considerable consensus emerged including on identification of the most pressing issues affecting residents of the district: affordability, not just in cost of living but also "cost of doing business." (McConnie-Saad); affordable health care and federal government investment in the city's infrastructure, mass transit (the need for increased federal support of SEPTA), cleanliness and safety and decent schools (Cephas, Stanford, Street, Oxman). Regarding "how to fix the ACA", both Stanford and Oxman, the two doctors among the candidates, agreed the health industry has to be held accountable and the U.S. should join the majority of countries in the industrial world providing universal health care.

There also was agreement among all candidates that ICE has gone too far, with most Democrats supporting the abolishment of ICE. (McConnie-Saad, Street [its culture is corrupt, it has "been infiltrated by neo-Nazis"], Stanford [its a "paramilitary organization that is taking money from schools"], Cephas [we must also "lean on cities not to cooperate with ICE", shut down detention centers and allow Congress to exercise its oversight authority]. Oxman (the Democrats need to "shut down the government if necessary" in dealing with funding for ICE). Schnell would not abolish ICE but supported reforming it and holding it accountable.

All candidates agreed that affordable housing is a critical need for the district to address the issue of homelessness (Oxman [largest growing segment of the homeless is among children; the federal government needs to invest more in housing]). McConnie-Saad, Cephas and Street agreed that private equity investment in housing is increasing costs and should be constrained or banned.

Two questions were posed that might particularly interest Center City residents. The first was whether the candidates would commit to opening a full-time staffed office in Center City within three months of being elected. By a show of hands, all candidates participating in the forum committed to do so. The candidates also were asked what current sitting member of Congress they would "choose as a mentor" if elected: Schnell: Rep. Thomas Massie, D-KY ("follows the Constitution" "able to work across the aisle"); Oxman: Rep. Brendan Boyle, D-PA ("also from Philadelphia" "is a leader and credit to his party"); Street: Rep.James Clyburn, D-SC ("able to get things done" "can speak to the highest seats of power as well as those who are left out") and also Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-MA (is able to break down complex economic issues); Rep. Stanford: Gregory Meeks, D-NY, former Rep. "Allyson Schwartz, D-PA ("worked on the Affordable Care Act"), Rep. Evans ("loved by the people" and serves as a mentor) and Rep. Ami Bera, M.D., D-CA. Stanford noted that the latter three individuals have endorsed her. Cephas: Rep.Ayanna Presley, D-MA (introduced free transportation for all legislation),

Rep. Lauren Underwood, D-IL (a leader on maternal health issues not only in her own district but in rural areas) and McConnie-Saad: AOC (Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez), D-NY (as a young, first term representative, she was successful in introducing and getting passed the Green New Deal) and Rep. Bill Foster, D-IL (one of the authors of Dodd-Frank [Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act of 2010] parts of which McConnie-Saad worked on implementing).

Distinguishing the Candidates From One Another

Space does not permit a detailed analysis of each of the candidates' responses to the eleven questions posed by the panel over the one and one-half hour forum. However, the responses to some of the questions revealed how the candidates will attempt to distinguish themselves from each other.

An obvious point of departure was between those candidates who currently hold public office (Street and Cephas) and those who have not held elected office before (Stanford, McConnie-Saad and Oxman) The former candidates stressed their experience and understanding of the legislative process and how to get things done. The latter candidates noted their "outsider" status (Stanford), not being part of politics as usual (McConnie-Saad) and experience in "innovation" (Stanford)

One flashpoint was the issue of corporate contributions to campaigns. McConnie-Saad and Oxman reported they do not accept corporate PAC donations. Oxman noted that accepting donations from, for example, pharmaceutical representatives "creates a sense of obligation." Cephas pledged not to accept corporate donations to her campaign. Street, on the other hand, noted he "not taken any pledges on rejecting corporate PAC money" noting that almost all of his money has come from local donors and individual contributions are capped at $5,000. He also noted that some candidates had the resources to self-fund or contribute substantial funds to their campaigns, while he has "lived on a public servant's salary".

Other Issues Affecting the Election

While the primary election is still several months away, several factors will play key roles. One, as discussed above is the funds each campaign is able to raise. Currently, Street is leading all candidates in fundraising. Another factor is the endorsements each candidate is able to secure. Street also leads in official endorsements. He recently was endorsed by Philadelphia's Democratic Party, which he formerly chaired. Earlier, he received the endorsement of the Philadelphia Building Trades & Construction Council, along with endorsements from a number of public officials and labor unions. Stanford was recruited to run for the seat by retiring Representative Evans, who has endorsed he (as have former Rep.Schwartz and current Rep. Bera). Schnell is the endorsed Republican candidate.

In addition to the six candidates who participated in the forum and State Senator Rabb who was unable to attend, there are number of other individuals who have declared their candidacy for the position including Democrats Karl Morris, Cole Carter,

Isaiah Martin, Robin Toldens, and Republican Sheila Armstrong. Depending on the number of candidates who actually appear on the ballot (candidates filing nomination petitions to appear on the general primary ballot for Representative in Congress need 1000 eligible signatures), the Democratic candidates are likely to split the vote so that the winning candidate might be elected with a thin plurality, making each candidate's "get out the vote" efforts among their base all the more crucial, since the candidate with the highest number of votes (i.e., not a majority) goes on to run in the general election. Currently, Street is the leading Democratic candidate; however, polls show that a large percentage of district voters remain undecided.

CCRA's Public Forum Program

The February 9 Congressional Candidate Forum was the latest in a series of programs sponsored by CCRA to inform Center City residents of critical issues affecting them. On December 3, 2025, CCRA presented a panel of experts to address "Homelessness in Center City: What is Being Done? What Can We Do?" On January 27, 2026, CCRA presented a Town Hall on "Trash on Our Sidewalks: Come Talk About the Causes and Solutions." Both events were well attended. If there are issues affecting Center City residents that you would like CCRA to cover, please let it know.