



City Council Election November 2007  
Written Questions

1. Affordable housing is a concern that city government and nonprofit groups have sought to address. As a City Councilor, what specific actions would you initiate and/or support to address increase the availability of affordable housing in our community?

First and foremost, I would work to get Iowa City to adopt an inclusionary zoning ordinance, whereby developers would, by code, be required to build a certain number of affordable homes (perhaps a mix of single family and duplex/townhouse or row-houses) in a new development. Of course, the availability of public transit is key to any affordable housing developments and I would want the City to commit to including public transit expansion as routinely as we do expanding other services to new areas.

We also should continue to promote the use of land trusts. In a land trust a new (affordable) home is built on land which continues to be owned by a nonprofit trust or by the City. The homeowner can do anything they want to the house and lot, but they never actually own the land. This means the home costs less and is taxed at a lower rate since the lot adds no monetary value to the price of the home.

Some cities have had success with target property tax rollbacks. This is a tool used most often in older neighborhoods which have been in decline and is usually applied block-by-block or even house by house. With these, new owner-occupiers agree to live in and improve their properties over a set period of time, usually five years. During that time property tax is paid only on the value of the land, not on the house, which, while a small savings at the outset, can be substantial over five years.

2. Describe in detail your vision for land use and zoning in Iowa City. What specific types of development are needed? What specific actions would you initiate to foster that development?

We need to encourage minimal sprawl development and smart infill development. We have a good start on this in some respects already. An example of the former: the Peninsula, which despite its flaws, is a good development concept: it's dense, garages/drives are loaded to the back, it's walkable, and includes single-family, townhome and apartment dwellings. A good example of the latter: the affordable zero-lot homes built at Sheridan and Grant Sts. They're within easy walking distance to schools, downtown, and are on bus lines.

Residential development, particularly in outlying/isolated areas, must include public transit (unlike the Peninsula) – car-centric developments should be avoided. We can offer incentives to developers (smaller lot width requirements, perhaps assistance on infrastructure) to promote denser developments. We must pass inclusionary zoning (see above) into our code.

3. Most building and expansion projects of significant size are requesting a TIF (Tax Incremental Financing) from Iowa City. Describe in detail the type of project, if any, that deserves a TIF. What conditions, if any, should the city place on TIFs? How specifically would you address the problems that Iowa City TIFs cause for county and school budgets?

As a rule, TIFs shouldn't happen in Iowa City. TIFs were designed to be applied in blighted areas; areas where new development would be considered nearly impossible without some kind of incentive. We have very few such areas in Iowa City. As now used, TIFs end up costing our community in multiple ways. Not only do they drain tax dollars from the City's coffers, they also take money from Johnson County and the school district. If we want to pass a TIF for a project, the schools and county must be consulted and their approval should be required for it to go forward. Beyond that, any TIF that's granted must include big strings, such as having the business pay a living wage to 90% of its workers (and include health-care benefits to same) and construction to LEED standards.

So would I support any TIF, ever? Possibly, but there would have to be some very compelling reasons to do so. None of the TIF applications I recall from the past few years would qualify, and certainly not the current application. Research shows that most businesses will locate/relocate/expand in a city regardless of whether or not there are economic incentives. Businesses look for quality of life, an educated workforce, and good infrastructure. We have those, and I believe we should collect the taxes owed to the city to keep improving our assets, not give the money away on a project that's going to happen regardless.

One other issue with TIFs is fairness. Why should new businesses get a TIF when a competing, established business has likely gotten no such help? I have a real problem with them on this level as well.

4. Describe in detail what activities you would undertake on the City Council to build a more cohesive public transportation system in and around Iowa City. Include discussion of pedestrian, bicycle, bus and car transportation.

We need to examine all methods of transport and make sure we're not favoring cars in our approach to transportation. When a street project comes along, existing streets should be re-engineered to make them pedestrian/bike friendly and to discourage high speed vehicle traffic (think of Burlington St.) and new streets must take these elements into consideration.

More specifically, we need to look at installing visual and audio countdown timers for pedestrians at heavily trafficked intersections, more and better placed marked crosswalks, and in certain locations, we probably ought to consider lighted crosswalks. An education campaign for drivers (and others, but mainly drivers) is a tool that has worked well in much larger communities; Chicago is now a very pedestrian-friendly place and much improved over just a few years ago.

I'd like to see Iowa City explore methods to promote bicycles as an easy, green, healthy way to get around. Bike lanes require some discussion (some bicyclists like them; others do

not) and we can a “city bikes” program, such as has been used in a number of European cities, where easily identifiable (and not very valuable) bikes are placed around town for anyone to use and later return.

Public transit in the area ought to be better coordinated; ideally we’re ready for a regional transit system, not individual operations like Iowa City Transit and Coralville Transit. Regional service with more, later routes and Sunday routes would be a huge improvement. Light rail between Iowa City, the Eastern Iowa Airport, and central Cedar Rapids is very desirable, and costs a lot less than another lane of cement added to I-380. We need to keep it on the burner.

5. Please list your top five priorities for action by the City Council and your reasoning for each.

Building and professionally staffing a new, northeast fire station. We last build a brand-new fire station in 1972, when our population was about 47,000 and the north-northeast parts of the City were still open land. Our population is now over 63,000 and those same areas now host businesses and residences which are too far from fire and rescue services.

Add officers to the police department. Our police force is, per-capita, the second smallest in Iowa, and we have lost positions in the past few years. We can’t do consistent community-based policing or neighborhood watch program, and our current force must frequently take involuntary overtime. That’s a signal right there; when involuntary overtime is being used regularly, there’s a staffing shortage.

Action on affordable housing. Our housing costs are the highest in Iowa, but our wages are not. We must do all we can to promote affordable housing so that the people who work in Iowa City can afford to live here.

Expand historic preservation. Much of Iowa City’s charm comes from the architecture of our downtown core neighborhoods, yet most of these areas are offered no protection via historic or conservation district overlays. New historic districts should be considered, particularly for the Northside and Goosetown neighborhoods, and the “old” center of downtown. Historic preservation pays off in many ways. Cities are made more attractive to visitors and potential residents, it’s “green”, it provides local jobs, and through grants and sweat-equity programs, it can work hand-in-hand to help promote affordable housing initiatives. As I’ve said many times, historic preservation doesn’t cost money; it makes money. The facts support this statement in Iowa City and elsewhere.

Push for “green” initiatives. Iowa City can start reducing our planetary carbon footprint. We’ve signed on to the Sierra Club’s Cool Cities program, and now we need to get serious about putting some of its improvements into place. Promote bicycling; expand public transit. Encourage LEED standards for new buildings; require it for any city building or any city-supported building. Explore alternatives to burning fossil-fuels for electricity: methane capture from the landfill; biomass technology to generate electricity. The possibilities are almost endless.

6. Public Measure C on the November election ballot authorizes only persons 21 years or older to be present in establishments with a liquor license after 10:00 pm. What do you believe are the major problems created by alcohol consumption in the community? What impact would approval of the referendum have on these problems? Describe alternative or additional approaches that you would support as part of a comprehensive plan for addressing alcohol consumption.

It's not news that Iowa City has one of the nation's worst binge-drinking problems, nor is it news that underage drinking is also a problem. The culture that's grown up around excessive alcohol consumption isn't healthy for anybody. Our downtown has a Bacchanalian atmosphere after about 9 PM Thursday – Saturday nights. It strains our police department, it's allowed bars to flourish at the expense of retail – the number of bars in downtown has increased dramatically over the past 20 years. The fact that you don't have to be 21 to get into a bar, coupled with turning a blind eye to underage drinking, means that Iowa City has become a magnet for underage drinkers. We draw people from Davenport, Cedar Rapids, Grinnell, etc. because if you're underage, you can get a drink in Iowa City. It's a safety problem, and an enforcement problem.

As you may know, I personally support the ordinance, but see it only as a starting point: the legal age ordinance, if passed, will not be a panacea. The University of Iowa needs to get serious about alcohol abuse education, must give a serious look at additional residence hall housing, and needs to use its resources to give students more direction (reintroducing Friday classes is a good move) and more to do on campus on the weekends. The City needs to take steps towards rezoning to restrict additional bars in the downtown area and to do what it can to encourage alcohol- and smoke-free venues for music.

7. Public Measure D on the November election ballot authorizes a permanent Police Citizen's Review Board that would make recommendations regarding the policies, practices and procedures of the police department, investigate citizen claims of police misconduct and have the authority to subpoena witnesses. Explain your personal position on this issue and describe alternative or additional approaches that you would support as part of a comprehensive solution to overseeing police department functioning.

I like the PCRFB and think it should be part of the Iowa City charter, no question. However, I believe this ballot initiative could have been crafted differently. The logistics of the subpoena and mandatory forum requirements probably deserve a separate initiative and I have some concerns about the utility of an mandated annual forum, but these concerns don't outweigh my overall support for the initiative.