



JOHNSON COUNTY
Affordable Housing Coalition

**2019
IOWA CITY
COUNCIL
CANDIDATE
RESPONSES**

Question 1: How should the city invest its Affordable Housing Fund (which totaled \$1M in FY20)? How should this allocation be funded in the future? Similarly, what's the best way to spend the money that the city is accumulating when developers pay a fee-in-lieu rather than offering affordable units in Riverfront Crossings?

AT-LARGE CANDIDATES

Vote for no more than two (2)

MEGAN ALTER

I want to see the city investigate and invest in a range of options recommended by local experts who know resident needs and opportunities for sustainable affordable housing (e.g. The Housing Trust Fund of Johnson County; Affordable Housing Coalition of Johnson County; Habitat for Humanity Iowa City [not a comprehensive list]).

What I have learned as an HCDC commissioner is that a combination of subsidies and incentives is the most economical and effective. (See next question for specifics). But additional investments also include continuing to partner with developers to build affordable housing through the use of LIHTC, helping low-income home owners with low-interest loans for improvements (GRIP), and further preserving the affordable housing that we already have through tax abatements.

To protect the Affordable Housing Fund, the city must continue to provide it with a line item in the budget. To meet its funding goals, the City must maintain its relationships with developers to ensure that affordable housing (actual or fee-in-lieu) is incorporated into development agreements; the City must continue to work with non-profits.

LAURA BERGUS

Affordable Housing Fund dollars should be most heavily invested in permanent affordable housing solutions. I agree with the city's allocation of these funds as adopted by City Council: 50% to the JC Housing Trust Fund; 25-30% for land banking; 20% for Low Income Housing Tax Credit support granted through the Housing and Community Development Commission's CDBG/HOME funds process; up to 5% for emergent situations, in City Council's discretion. (*JCAHC NOTE: This allocation formula was changed for the current fiscal year to reduce the amount set aside for land banking and add funding for down payment assistance and other initiatives.*) With growing need and elimination of the State of Iowa backfill for lost property tax revenue, we must look to alternative funding sources, considering a local option sales tax as well as other revenue options.

The fee-in-lieu payments in Riverfront Crossings should support permanent affordable housing solutions in Riverfront Crossings, and I agree with allocating those fees as above for Riverfront Crossings projects, although a more flexible allocation might be necessary given the limited geographic scope of development, compared to Affordable Housing Fund dollars that are spread throughout the city.

JANICE WEINER

Let me say up front that I am not an expert on this – I'm learning every day. That said, I believe one of the best ways to invest the affordable housing fund is into the Housing Trust Fund of Johnson County with its revolving loans, as well as in other options where it can leverage additional funding or serve as seed funding – such as when a city contribution is needed to access state or federal funds. That way, the money both makes a statement and is multiplied. With respect to fee-in-lieu-of, my understanding is that it currently must be spent in Riverfront Crossings, but if council elects to change that, I would like to see it spent – or used to leverage additional funds – to build in areas of the city where land is relatively less expensive and builders can construct modest housing at a lower price point. It would also be helpful to consult with the school board to see where, in their view, affordable housing could help improve diversity at elementary schools without them having to gerrymander.

DISTRICT C

Unopposed

JOHN THOMAS

I would like to explore investing in housing improvements in neighborhoods where neighborhood confidence and health would benefit from re-investment. Improving existing housing stock should generate more affordable housing than new construction, which has a higher cost per unit. Investments in improving energy efficiency would advance affordability by reducing utility costs, as well as reduce carbon emissions.

I would like to explore funding sources other than the general fund, such as general obligation funds or as an element of a local option sales tax.

My understanding of the in-lieu fees generated by new Riverfront Crossings development is that they must be spent in Riverfront Crossings. Finding a property with low land costs near public transit would be a starting point.

Question 2: What should the city do to create more opportunities for households who are currently paying over half of their monthly income in rent? Do you support locally-funded, tenant-based rental assistance (similar to Section 8 housing vouchers, but funded locally)? Do you support allocating local dollars in order to create more units that are income-targeted for people making 30% or less of the area median income?

AT-LARGE CANDIDATES

Vote for no more than two (2)

MEGAN ALTER

Yes, I do support locally-funded, tenant-based rental assistance. I have been campaigning since this summer to support this option in order to provide affordable housing to people in need more quickly and sustainably. I also support creating more units income-targeted for people who are 30% or below AMI. Because Iowa City's median income is roughly \$41,000 (adjusted for inflation) this is a needed support for the community. These uses of city funding will create more opportunities to help households currently paying over half of their monthly income in rent as well as helping those who live substantially under the AMI of Iowa City.

LAURA BERGUS

I hope that current market forces will be one positive factor: many additional housing units coming online should help relieve some pressure and hopefully decrease rents. I am in favor of inclusionary zoning, and would like to continue to consider regulatory alternatives that might streamline the process for development of affordable housing.

I do support locally funded, tenant-based rental assistance, including rental deposit assistance. Iowa City does need more units for those making 30% or less of area median income. Iowa City should continue to promote and facilitate incentive programs such as CDBG/HOME funds, rental rehab, low-interest loans, and tax exemptions. I will advocate for the continued review and reconsideration of the Affordable Housing Location Model to make sure that it is not just limiting low-income housing in some areas but actually incentivizing it in other areas to help create neighborhoods with a mix of housing throughout the city.

JANICE WEINER

I think we should look seriously at changes to our zoning laws – allow zero lot lines, smaller setbacks, smaller lots, for example; and consider having the city create an incentive by paying, or helping to pay to put in streets and utilities (which otherwise builders are responsible for and which hikes prices) – I believe that is currently happening with the extension of Foster Road, for example. We could also consider really small lots for small homes that are actually bricks and sticks. In theory, tenant-based rental assistance (as opposed to caps on rents or other things the state won't let us do) could be positive, but I worry about our ability to fund them. Perhaps it could be done not on a city-specific level, but on a county-wide level, with municipalities contributing a certain amount and the county kicking in some funds as well. I think we could also leverage at least part of our \$1 million to help secure additional funding to build or rehab more units that are targeted at people making 30% or less of the area median income. We might find that Habitat could be a valuable partner. Working with our experienced NGOs in general – many of which have significant expertise to share – can only be a plus. I wonder if we might also reach out to our faith communities.

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JOHN THOMAS

The City has not yet considered changes to our zoning regulations, the last remaining unfinished action in our Affordable Housing Action Plan. Such changes could significantly reduce the cost of new construction by reducing minimum lot size, setbacks, parking requirements, etc.

The locally-funded rental assistance idea is worth considering. I'm always interested in best practices.

I'm not sure how to best address creating more units for households earning less than 30% AMI. My sense is that increasing Section 8 housing vouchers is an important strategy. If federal or state dollars aren't there, doing it with local dollars would be required.

Question 3: How should the City of Iowa City measure its affordable housing progress?

AT-LARGE CANDIDATES

Vote for no more than two (2)

MEGAN ALTER

- Create yearly comparisons of affordable housing to renters with a housing cost burden greater than 30 % of their income. Over 5 years, increase the number of units for very low incomes (specific number to be determined by local housing experts, NGOs, staff, and council)
- Increase number of units available to persons with disabilities and the elderly (number tbd as above) – These units will need to have specific accommodations for accessibility in addition to income-based need.
- Sustain and grow the Affordable Housing budget line
- Continue to review programs currently in effect for Affordable Housing and look for additional and/or more effective programs for the City
- Continue to bring the University of Iowa into the conversation as a stakeholder

LAURA BERGUS

We need to regularly assess how many households are cost-burdened and see the number trending downward as a percentage of the population (and hopefully total number of households will decrease, too). The city must lean on partners in collecting data and conducting studies. I commend the city for efforts that consider a variety of housing needs and also include affordability, like the assessment aimed at student housing in the 2017 joint University of Iowa, Coralville, and Iowa City Strategic Housing Master Plan, and the 2019 Fair Housing Choice Study, which identified lack of affordable housing as the most common barrier to fair housing choice in Iowa City. We need to be sure we follow through on implementing recommendations formed from such studies.

JANICE WEINER

Good question. I think there could be a couple of possible metrics. One could be the percentage of households that spend upward of 50% of their income on housing. Another could be number of actual units built or rehabbed (assuming we have some idea of the full scope of those who need affordable housing). I would also like to look at units that have been built and added to what is supposed to be the affordable housing pool, to see if they are having any impact on reducing these numbers. We should also be taking a close look at market rates. There are a lot of “for rent” signs out. If the market is going to work, some of those rents should start coming down, especially as even more units are added to the pool (or the landlords should start investing in improvements to make those units more attractive).

DISTRICT C

Unopposed

JOHN THOMAS

The number of affordable dwellings could be identified, by different levels of household income. I would also like to keep track of housing investments advancing our climate actions and neighborhood stabilization/revitalization efforts.

Note: The Affordable Action Plan of 2016 was ambitious, and a huge amount of work and results were accomplished in 3 years. And now, those goals must be continued and updated to reflect our continuing efforts and priorities for affordable housing in Iowa City. We must continue to think of ways to get people into units and homes they can afford.

Question 4: What, if any, affiliation do you have with the Johnson County Affordable Housing Coalition or local housing providers?

AT-LARGE CANDIDATES

Vote for no more than two (2)

MEGAN ALTER

I am a non-voting member of the Affordable Housing Coalition and a current Housing Community Development Commissioner.

LAURA BERGUS

I am a new member of the Johnson County Affordable Housing Coalition. I am a financial supporter of organizational partners of the Coalition, including Shelter House, CWJ, and DVIP. I am also the landlord of one small, single-family home, offering below-market rent, and our tenant participates in Iowa City's Housing Choice Voucher program.

JANICE WEINER

My sole affiliation is with Shelter House – I serve on the board.

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JOHN THOMAS

I attend JCAHC meetings and meetings related to affordable housing as often as I can, and will be applying for membership.