



Oakland Mayoral Candidate Questionnaire

Ken Houston

EBHO is a member-driven organization working to preserve, protect, and create affordable housing opportunities for low-income communities in the East Bay by educating, advocating, organizing, and building coalitions.

1. Do you believe that housing is a human right? If not, why not? If so, what are you going to do ensure every one of your constituents has a safe, quality place to call home?

Yes. I feel everyone has the right to food, healthcare, and housing. Nothing is absolute, you can't give everyone a safe, quality place to live, but it's a goal to strive for. The situation in Oakland today with the housing and homeless is at a crisis level that could have been avoided if the City leaders had addressed it five years ago. But now we have this problem, and I do have solutions.

First, on a macro level, I have been talking with the State about issues that affect Oakland, in particular, homelessness and illegal dumping, and I am currently working with the County as a Subject Matter Expert, from living with the homeless for 7 nights and 30 days and because I brought my experiences back to the County to assess the situation and create pilots and solution, and also because I have been addressing blight in Oakland through a nonprofit that I founded in 2014.

On a micro level, what I am currently doing for the homeless is providing a safe, quality place to call home for homeless individuals that are willing to work, paid through stipends, so they can afford some type of housing. For example, I have a tenant named Hans, who was homeless for two years. He now has his driver's license back, his tickets expunged, a bank account, a truck, a safe place to live, and has a job through a nonprofit organization picking up mattresses for Alameda County.

There is plenty of housing in Oakland that could be affordable, but it's not. I will address this issue in question 10. But right now, I am working with my family to build homes on vacant, blighted lots that are 100% affordable. The lots that are there, and the City can have the infrastructure done – the sewer laterals, the gas lines, etc. These lots can be made be ready for building on, for Oakland residents to go the bank and get a construction loan. The hardest part is to get all the clearances and the plans to build it. Once you have all that, you can get a loan. The City has the power to do this, and I know this as a construction project manager, because we're doing it right now. The City just needs to pick up the infrastructure and permit costs so that it is not passed down to the buyer. Once they do one -- it's "cookie-cutter" -- they can do the others, and the savings can be passed on to the residents, because the hard work – the infrastructure and the permitting phase -- is done. Now you have a homeowner with an affordable home, and you've just gotten rid of a blighted property that has been dumped on for years. You just resolved two problems.



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2. EBHO has put forward a proposal for a package of measures to preserve existing rental housing resources and protect tenants from displacement. What would you do to strengthen the condo conversion ordinance, prevent conversion of single room occupancy (SRO) residential hotels, and regulate short-term rentals such as Airbnb and dedicate transient occupancy taxes from short-term rentals to support affordable housing?

I would need to do some research on what the package of measures is, as I have not seen it. At the very least these measures should include regulations for safe, quality, and affordable housing, and if they are not included, I would push to add safe, quality, and affordable housing to these measures.

3. What do you think are the critical elements of a public land policy for Oakland? Would you prioritize the use of public land for development of affordable housing? How would you ensure that at a minimum the City fully complies with the Surplus Land Act?

Yes, I would prioritize the use of public land for development of affordable housing. I talked about this in Question No. 1. My family purchased lots and right now is showing the City how to have best use of vacant lots that have been blighted for years and years – vacant lots that have been costing taxpayer money because of the blight and transforming them to create 100% affordable rentals and ownership. So as Mayor I would expand on what we're doing right now and create more affordable housing by building on vacant lots.

To ensure that the City fully complies, I would strengthen the relationship between the Mayor and City Council. The Mayor does not implement policy. The Mayor only implements what City Council creates, and those policies need to be stronger. You need to have relationships to do this, and I have a good relationship with the City Council. There are three seats are up for election this term, but regardless of who wins these races, I can influence Council to implement policies. I would first build relationships with those who are new on Council –there will be at least one new councilmember (District 4). It's about the Mayor and City Council working with one another – not against each other, and as Mayor I will work with Council to implement the necessary policies to develop public land for development.

4. What new sources of funding would you consider to create an ongoing stream of dedicated funding for affordable housing production?

Everyone knows, when you look at the Oakland skyline, that we are in a construction boom. New development, both public and private, with the tech companies coming in and taking advantage of the boom – these developers and tech companies would have to contribute more funds to the Affordable Housing Trust Fund. Period.



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5. In 2016, the City Council reallocated “Boomerang Funds” (the city’s share of property tax increment that used to fund redevelopment) from affordable housing development to homeless services. Measure W would create a vacant property tax to fund homeless services and deal with illegal dumping. If this measure passes, would your budget proposal ensure that the Boomerang Funds are returned to their original purpose of providing permanent housing?

Yes. development was dissolved, the City set up Boomerang Funds to include ALL property tax revenue received. Boomerang Funds were diverted from the General Fund into a separate fund for affordable housing purposes. This is called the Affordable Housing Trust Fund. And yes, I would support a budget that returns Boomerang Funds to its original purpose, to provide permanent housing.

6. What do you feel are the greatest barriers to affordable housing development in Oakland, and how would you remove those barriers?

My thoughts on barriers: First, construction costs, financing issues, and the gap between the working poor and the middle class that is becoming closer and closer. This means working-class and middle class people, like most of us who are here, are competing for the same programs.

Also, there is too much politics and pressure behind Oakland’s policies. There is a disconnect in Oakland between the councilmembers and the current mayor – they do not have a good relationship to effectively implement policy. As Mayor, I will bridge that gap and help influence Council to pass policies that are in the best interest of the people – not in the best interests of the politicians. The current mayor does not have the skillset nor the relationships to influence policy that is beneficial to the people. So the first barrier to remove is the barrier that exists between City Council and the Mayor. Next, you need to implement policies that are in the best interests of the people. As a Community Advocate, I am the conduit between the City and the people, and as Mayor I will be able to bridge that gap because I will bring a community advocate piece to Oakland’s politics.

7. Oakland is in the middle of an unprecedented building boom, with building permits issued for over 7,000 units between 2015 and 2017, and thousands more in the pipeline. This is far more housing that was created under the “10K” Program in the early 2000s. However, 93% of the housing being built is market rate for above moderate-income households, while only 7% is affordable to very low, low and moderate income households. Oakland’s Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA) incorporated in the adopted Housing Element states that 50% of new housing should be for very low, low and moderate income. What will you do to ensure that Oakland’s housing production is at least proportional to the City’s stated needs?

From serving on Oakland’s Building Services Task Force and from being a Project Manager, I am very familiar with the building boom. Just as I was influential in creating the current 50% local participation policy for the workforce in Oakland and moved it to the Oakland Unified School



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District (OUSD), I see no problem with implementing a similar policy on private and public projects, to reach for a 50% affordable housing. This involves incentives to developers.

As Mayor, I would find the incentives for developers that want to build in Oakland to create a higher percentage of their units to be affordable. The current administration has allowed *unaffordable* housing to be built all over the City. Under my watch, that would end.

To be honest, it will be difficult to achieve 50% -- it will be a too much of a fight to get that much -- however, we can set that as our goal and get close to it, if incentives are created through policies passed by City Council. We can certainly do better 7% -- in fact, we must do better than that -- but I am not going to promise 50%, and anyone here who says they can do it, I wouldn't trust that promise. They don't know enough about what goes on behind the scenes. This is about creating policies, as I said earlier, and you've got to move fast. The next four years are critical.

8. How will you work with the county and with MTC/ABAG to provide regional solutions to homelessness and affordable housing?

As I said form my opening statement, I am here to tell you my experiences. I am currently working with the County on the homeless situation. I lived in a homeless encampment for 7 nights and 30 days and brought my experience back to the County. Today the County is working to implement policies and legislation and pilots to the regional problem, to bring regional solutions to the problem of homelessness right now. Before I went to the County two years ago, they were looking at homelessness as Oakland's problem, at illegal dumping as Oakland's problem, at graffiti vandalism as Oakland's problem.

Before I approached the County I went to Oakland's city administration, over and over I went to them with solutions to these issues, but they fell on deaf ears because my solutions didn't match the City's Administration's agenda. However, when I brought my experiences and solutions to the County of Alameda, the County listened, and they embraced what I had to say. That is why today I am a member of the Alameda County's Illegal Dumping Working Group, which also addresses the issue of homelessness. And the County declared homelessness and illegal dumping to be regional problems, and today the County is working on solutions through a process called the three E's -- Education, Eradication, and Enforcement.

So to answer your question, I am already working with the County and will be happy to work with MTC/ABAG as well. In fact, I went beyond that and gave a tour to California State Association of Counties (CSAC) of Oakland's most blighted neighborhoods, which include homeless encampments. So, as a non-elected citizen, I am already in communication with various entities about these issues. As an elected official I will continue doing what I am already doing.

9. Large sections of Oakland, particularly in the North and East Oakland flatlands, have been recently designated "Opportunity Zones" where investors are entitled to significant federal tax benefits. How will you ensure that those investments benefit existing residents rather than



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exacerbate displacement in transitioning neighborhoods? Would you support the City reclaiming a portion of the enhanced value for affordable housing, for example by creating an Opportunity Zone overlay where housing impact fees and jobs/housing linkage fees would be higher than in other areas of the City?

I need to research this “Opportunity Zones” but I think this is a good idea for Opportunity Zone Layovers to be in these areas, for sure. However, investors that are taking advantage of these Opportunity Zones at the expense of the residents – those of us that have been here in the good times and the bad times -- that have equity in their homes should not be taken advantage of. So Opportunity Zones should not be for investors; they should be for the People.

10. Do you support Prop 10, and if it passes, what would you do to strengthen Oakland’s rent control?

This is a touchy subject -- rent control -- because you’ve got two sides: You’ve got renters, and you got owners. Renters want rent control, and owners want to make a profit from their investments. If you invested in a property and you had the foresight to see the growth and opportunity, and you went into the areas that nobody else wanted to go, and you purchased in those areas that were not desirable, you had a vision, while others without vision didn’t want to invest there. Now that these areas are beginning to be desirable, those who didn’t have the vision and didn’t want to invest back then -- now they want to capitalize on these areas and make a profit at the expense of those who have been here. So there’s not a clear-cut solution.

I am against those investors that came in like carpet baggers to swoop up property at a low cost and then are making tons of money at the expense of our residents. That, I am totally against. But for those who are from Oakland, who invested in these areas back when nobody else would, they should benefit from the growth.

City Council and the Mayor should have seen the carpet baggers coming. They allowed the carpet baggers to come in and buy up what they wanted. The City had the power to address that issue when it happened, after the Housing Crash. Now they are trying to address it after the fact – always reactive -- and now it will fall on me as the Mayor -- and I will resolve these issues as Mayor -- but we will need to go back to the drawing board. Not every investor should be subject to the same rules and regulations. Just like homeless need to be analyzed on a case-by-case basis, so do the investors and the renters.

11. The Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher Program only serves a fraction of the people who qualify. Those who are fortunate enough to receive such assistance often discover that they cannot find landlords willing to accept their vouchers. What would you do to ensure that Section 8 vouchers are accepted throughout the City so that all who receive them can actually use them?

As I said, I am going to share my experiences and what I’ve done. I have been a landlord; I rented to Section 8. The problem is certain things with Section 8 must be changed. Landlords



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are getting more money with market rate than what Section 8 is requiring. You need to make Section 8 more advantageous. How do you make it that way? As a landlord, I can tell you, 9 out of 10 times, when a Section 8 moves out of a unit or a home, it is tore up, most were completely wrecked. If incentives could be added to the system so that when a renter moves out the owner can bring it back 100% to the way it was before, that it how you incentivize the landlords.

Now you have people waiting for two years because of the stigma, and the stigma is related to the reality that properties do get destroyed by Section 8 more than by market rate renters; that is not a myth; it's a fact. So then the landlords have to take care of the damage -- fumigating, stoves, refrigerators, carpets, linoleums, shower doors, garbage disposals – you name it – the Section 8 funds do not allow for these things that need to be replaced. So as Mayor I would work with the system to make everyone whole, so that people can afford to rent, but also so that landlords can afford to rent to Section 8 people and get these people off the streets.

12. What measures will you support to prevent at risk households from becoming homeless, and what would you do to provide housing for those who are already homeless? Please discuss both short-term and long-term strategies.

The County of Alameda In Home Health Services (IHHS) has a great program that they are in the process of implementing. I know Laurie Cox of IHHS, and she taking care of the homeless individuals out there, and setting up a program where if family members are willing to bring their homeless members in, they get paid to help. There are many families that want to help their homeless relatives, but they simply cannot afford it. For those who do not need serious mental or health services, the homeless can get jobs and support themselves, to some extent, if they just have the step up which would be the County paying individuals to take in the homeless.

We do need to build more affordable housing, and we should be able to get the permit department to help individuals build small units in their backyards with a seamless process, so they can rent out to individuals in a quick, fast, efficient way -- maybe even drop a connex box with underground utilities in their yards. Long term, we need more affordable housing, and we need to have developers and tech companies contributing to the Affordable Trust Fund so that we have funds to solve these problems.

If it's a man-made problem, there is a man-made solution. As Mayor, I assure you, I am all about solutions and using innovative methods by thinking outside the box. We can solve these issues. It will take someone who is not a politician tied to their own self-interest – and that is why you have so many candidates for Mayor of Oakland that are not politicians. What Oakland needs is new leadership with new ideas and a commitment to serve the public, not the political machinery.