

East Bay Housing Organizations Oakland City Councilmember Candidate Questionnaire 2024

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.

The purpose of this questionnaire is to educate and inform communities on each candidate's stance on the housing issues directly impacting them, and does not indicate endorsement. All candidates for City Council have been invited to complete the questionnaire.

Candidate Name: Zac Unger

Please give a brief introduction of yourself. (50 word limit) I'm a lifelong Oaklander, 27-year Oakland firefighter, union president, and father of three OUSD kids. I'm a pragmatic and solutions-oriented public servant, skilled at building coalitions and finding common ground. My priorities include affordable housing, public safety that encompasses both police and violence-prevention programs, and reducing dysfunction in city government.

Questions: (200 word limit for each response)

1. Everybody needs a place to call home, but for too many people, the private market is failing to meet that need. Some advocates argue that the City should focus on removing regulatory restrictions to speed up development of market-rate housing, thereby expanding supply to lower the cost of housing for everyone. Others argue that the market has produced plenty of housing for above-moderate income households, and the City should prioritize housing affordable to those with low incomes. Where do you stand on this, and what actions would you take?

While we have largely met our market-rate housing goals, we continue to fall short on affordable housing. Nonetheless, building more market rate housing applies downward pressure on rental prices for all housing, which is a good thing. As people move into higher-end market rate housing, this frees up their previous, more affordable units for newer tenants who need that lower price point. Given that our housing problems are on the supply side, any increase in supply will help alleviate our problems. I do not believe in razing affordable housing to make way for market rate housing unless the new development includes significantly more affordable units than the previous

unit. While I don't want to disincentivize the construction of new market rate projects that include significant affordable units, for someone experiencing housing precarity the fact that a market rate unit has dipped from \$4000/month to \$3500 is irrelevant. City government must focus its attention and resources on workforce housing, affordable construction on public lands, and hotel and apartment acquisition and conversion.

2. What current sources of affordable housing funding would you increase or expand? Now that the Regional Housing Bond is no longer on this Fall's ballot, what new sources would you support? Please identify both one-time and ongoing funding streams.
 - a. We need to go back to the drawing board and get a Regional Housing Bond on the next ballot.
 - b. The City of Oakland can't do this alone, and we must leverage every penny of State and Federal assistance that we can, including Block Grants and Low Income Housing Tax Credits.
 - c. We must hold the County to account and make sure that they focus more of their attention and funding on Oakland, as we are the highest-need city in the county.
 - d. I believe in public-private partnerships for new construction.
 - e. Tax Increment Financing and Enhanced Infrastructure Financing Districts can help us build significant amounts of housing in neighborhoods that currently do not have enough.
 - f. Without chilling new construction, we must aggressively apply and collect impact fees.

3. What is your position on Proposition 5, and why?

California is still suffering the effects of Proposition 13, nearly 50 years after its passage. While nobody loves paying taxes, we also don't like living with the consequences that come with being unable to fund public goods. Bond financing is often the only way to fund affordable housing and other public infrastructure programs. I do not believe we should let a minority of our population—often the most well-funded segment at that—dictate whether we can provide shelter for the most vulnerable in our society. We need to pass Prop 5 to lower the voting threshold. I also supported Schools and Communities First and I will support other measures to make sure that corporations pay their fair share in property taxes.

4. In the previous Housing Element cycle (2015-2022), Oakland permitted seven units of market-rate housing for every low or moderate income unit, producing double our assigned need for market-rate but only one-third of our affordable housing need. What do you consider to be the greatest barriers to development of affordable housing in Oakland, and what strategies will you take to remove those barriers to ensure that Oakland's housing production is more balanced and at least proportional to the City's stated needs?
 - A. Staff up our planning and permitting departments and streamline city processes to make developers want to do more business. Processes in other cities are faster, cheaper, and more predictable than Oakland's; there is no reason we can't adopt best practices from other cities.
 - B. Reduce square footage and other requirements so we can build more units on smaller parcels. Density and affordability are the goals! Reduce parking minimums, reduce limiting factors like neighboring lot composition, and incentivize construction for financial viability.
 - C. Single-stair reform and elevator reform. As a career firefighter I am in a unique position to have this conversation, promoting safety while simultaneously advocating for greater ability to build larger, cheaper units.
 - D. We need to continue to upzone high-resource neighborhoods. Not only is it a moral imperative for all neighborhoods to do their share to alleviate the housing crisis, upzoning high-resource neighborhoods has anti-gentrification effects and can democratize and diversify all parts of the City. Encouraging mixed-use developments, especially along commercial corridors and near transit, must be a priority.
 - E. Be mindful not to leave low-resource neighborhoods behind. We must plan and encourage development so that low-resource neighborhoods can share in the improvements and wealth creation that other neighborhoods enjoy.

5. Oakland has a number of policies to protect renters from unaffordable rent increases, arbitrary evictions, and other forms of displacement. Which programs do you think are most effective? What changes would you support? Are there new tenant protection and anti-displacement policies that you would pursue?
 - a. I believe in rent control and providing access to attorneys for people who might not be able to afford them.

- b. I support tenant opportunity to purchase and I would like to learn more about how to expand programs like this.
 - c. Preventing homelessness is easier, more cost effective, and—most importantly—more humane than trying to rehouse unsheltered people. We must help Oaklanders access Section 8 and other rental assistance programs to prevent them from becoming unsheltered to begin with.

- 6. What measures will you support to prevent at-risk households from becoming unhoused, and what would you do to provide housing for those who are already experiencing homelessness? Please discuss both short-term and long-term strategies. What steps should the City take to prevent criminalizing homelessness, particularly after the Grants Pass decision and the Governor’s executive order, and to focus instead on solutions for unhoused people?
 - a. I am a supporter of transitional housing, including Project Homekey and the Tiny Cabins. Transitional housing works; it’s not a long-term strategy to have people living in these situations, but as supportive, transitional housing, these programs are absolutely essential.
 - b. We must provide more services to people experiencing homelessness, including medical care of all kinds, including mental health services; job training and placement assistance; legal aid; addiction counseling and treatment.
 - c. I believe in funding temporary emergency rental assistance and providing funds for people to get back into shelter quickly once they have lost their homes. Rehousing becomes more and more difficult the longer a person or family are unsheltered.
 - d. While I don’t believe we can allow unrestricted encampments in every location, we also know that simply sweeping away encampments does not end homelessness, but just relocates it. We must continue to offer housing to anyone before they are swept out of an encampment.

- 7. Local jurisdictions have a legal obligation to Affirmatively Further Fair Housing in all their housing and community development policies. What does this mean to you? What specific policies would you pursue to address the disparate impacts our housing system has on Oakland residents of color, particularly Black, Brown and Indigenous people? What should the City do to ensure a more equitable distribution of affordable housing across all parts of the City rather than concentrating it in low income neighborhoods and communities of color?

- a. I am proud of having been involved in the effort to upzone Rockridge, and I believe that all neighborhoods need to do their part to increase the housing supply.
 - b. Making neighborhoods denser makes them safer, more vibrant, more diverse, and more equitable. This should be an affirmative goal.
 - c. We must continue to upzone high-resource neighborhoods while also investing in lower-resource neighborhoods so that they are not left behind.
 - d. Structural racism exists in so many facets of our society, and housing is a key place where this inequitable treatment occurs. We must continue to provide resources to low-income tenants to prevent displacement, prevent negative behavior by predatory landlords, and make sure that fair housing laws are being upheld.
8. Oakland has been considering adoption of a Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act, which would give tenants the opportunity to purchase their rental units if their buildings are offered for sale. Do you support giving tenants (and nonprofit community organizations) a right of first offer and a right of first refusal? Why or why not? Are there particular provisions or exemptions that you would seek?
 - a. I am excited about the opportunity for TOPA and similar legislation. I must admit that I don't know enough about the specific details of proposed legislation to be able to provide a more intelligent response. But I support the idea theoretically, and I additionally believe we must enact legislation to limit corporations from scooping up single-family homes and removing them from local ownership and control.
9. In December 2018, the City Council adopted a Land Disposition Policy to prioritize the use of surplus public land for affordable housing. Staff was directed to bring back an implementing ordinance within 6 months, but that hasn't happened. What will you do to ensure that a Public Land Ordinance is drafted, enacted and implemented consistent with the adopted policy? What do you think are the most critical elements of a public land policy for Oakland? What role should the community play in the disposition and use of public land?
 - a. I don't know why staff has not returned this policy, but Council must use their power and their bully pulpit to help the Director understand that this is a crucial directive that must be followed. My guess is that the Department is likely understaffed and that we must dedicate resources to making sure that we can hire well-trained people to do this crucial work.

- b. Public lands should be prioritized for uses that benefit citizens over pure profit-seekers. I am very interested in using public lands to develop workforce housing, which will help us attract and retain quality employees, while also adding the vibrancy and commitment that comes when people live near where they work.
 - c. Community input is vital in deciding how to use public lands, but we also can't allow ourselves to fall victim to analysis paralysis, endlessly debating before we move forward. I understand that every decision will disappoint somebody, but bearing the brunt of that disappointment is part of the job of a council member. We must make decisions and move forward rather than allowing every project to founder under the weight of the impossible attempt to please everyone.
10. For large projects such the Coliseum area, what community benefits should the City seek and at what levels? Would you require inclusion of affordable housing, and if so, what percentage should be affordable and what income levels should be targeted? Who should pay for that development?
- a. I don't know enough about the specifics of the Coliseum deal to offer detailed comments about percentages. But my understanding is that AASEG has committed to significant community benefits including affordable housing.
 - b. For all projects, we need to ensure that developers offer community benefits and affordable housing. We can't overdemand to such a point that nobody does projects here, but we also can't allow Oakland to be steamrolled by for-profit companies looking to avoid giving back to the community. Finding that balance requires hiring skillful people in our Housing and Planning departments and in seeking consultations from experts who have deep understanding of the market.
 - c. Developers who want to make money here should be required to provide affordable housing and community benefits. I am also interested in exploring ways in which the City, County, and State can partner with for-profit developers to leverage nascent construction and expand affordable housing components. It's easier and cheaper to add on to an existing plan than for government to start from scratch and produce housing independently.

Thanks!