

RYAN JAMES

Candidate for City Council – Responses

- 1. What motivated you to run for council/re-election, what parts of your professional and personal experience qualifies you to serve, and what measurable outcomes should voters hold you accountable for if you are elected?**

I'm running because, as costs rise and wages remain flat, more and more families in our region are feeling the pressure. Many are facing the same outcomes my mother and I did. We were first-generation homeowners, but we lost our home when our small business collapsed during the 2008 financial crisis. We experienced homelessness. It was only when my mother found stable employment as a public school teacher and later became a principal that we regained our footing. That shaped my deep belief in the power of work and the importance of creating real economic mobility for families.

My professional background and experience as a young leader give me both the perspective and the drive to help families earn their way out of today's affordability crisis. I've worked in City Hall, in direct service as a social services worker, and now in the nonprofit space where I lead housing and economic stability efforts for one of the largest philanthropic institutions in the region.

I've also seen many of my peers leave Cincinnati for cities with more vibrant job markets and better public systems. I believe this city is a great place to stay, but I also believe we have to work to make it a place that people actively choose. We need to invest in our workforce, housing, and innovation economy to make Cincinnati a true destination for talent with options.

If elected, I want to be held accountable for expanding access to housing, strengthening job and career pathways, and making public systems more responsive to residents. I believe in a Cincinnati that grows, and I believe we have to grow in a way that brings everyone with us.

- 2. Last year the Cincinnati Futures Commission released its report containing recommendations that chart a fiscally sustainable path forward for the City and develop a community-informed economic agenda for the future.**

- a. How would you accelerate the implementation of the Futures Commission, and which specific recommendations do you believe are the top priority for the City?**

The Futures Commission gave us some bold and necessary ideas, but ideas alone are not implementation. If elected, I would push Council to actually prioritize the pieces that are both achievable and equitable. We should start with recommendations that grow revenue without placing new burdens on working families. Things like better use of city-owned land, collecting voluntary contributions from large tax-exempt institutions, and ensuring our tax incentive programs actually pay off for the public. But we also need to be honest. Some parts of the report ask us to think differently about how we fund services and invest in growth. That can be uncomfortable, but it is a conversation we need to have if we want to remain competitive as a city. I would support setting clear timelines for reviewing and adopting the most promising recommendations, with public updates that show how progress is being made. The Commission is a starting point, not a final answer. Our job on Council is to turn those ideas into action, filter out what does not work for our residents, and build real public trust in how we manage the city's future.

- b. Do you support the creation of the Office of Strategic Growth?**

I have not been a part of any conversations about launching a Department of Strategic Growth. That said, I have reviewed the Futures Commission report and I think the concept has real potential. I am optimistic about the idea if it can help the city be more intentional about aligning long-term development goals with equity, infrastructure, and housing needs. I would want to better understand how the office would work in practice, how it would be resourced, and how it would complement rather than duplicate existing efforts. But at its core, a citywide strategy for growth is something I strongly support.

- c. Are there recommendations you believe the City should not pursue?**

I support the city taking bold action to improve our fiscal future and economic competitiveness, but I believe we need to be thoughtful about how we implement recommendations so we do not unintentionally burden working families. While I have optimism for many of the Futures Commission's proposals, I would be cautious about moving too quickly on any strategies that increase costs for residents without clear community benefit or adequate safeguards. For example, I would want to closely evaluate

revenue-generating proposals like fees or service consolidations to ensure they do not disproportionately affect lower-income residents.

- 3. The City's budget is constrained, with major obligations to the pension, public safety, and infrastructure. Please describe your budget priorities, including where you believe the City can save money and where the City should grow its spending. What tradeoffs would you be willing to make to fund your key priorities?**

I see the budget process as one of the most powerful tools a Councilmember has to make real change. Our job is to make sure the city's dollars are being spent where they matter most. For me, that means prioritizing public safety, ensuring residents across all neighborhoods have access to high-quality services, and expanding our investments in human services, especially programs that support economic mobility. The budget should reflect the everyday needs of the people we serve.

When it comes to tradeoffs, I bring real experience to the table. I have a Master of Public Administration and have worked in City Hall. I believe in protecting our public employees while also driving innovation that cuts costs. That means eliminating redundancy, modernizing how we deliver services, and replacing outdated processes with digital tools that save money and time. I would look closely at inefficiencies and waste in department expenditures to reinvest in the programs that keep our city running and help our residents get ahead.

- 4. Do you support an increase in the City's earning tax in the next Council term? If yes, how much would you increase it and what would you utilize the revenue for?**

Yes: Safety, Job growth, Human Services

- 5. The City has a number of external partners like REDI Cincinnati, The Port, CincyTech, Cintrifuse, 3CDC and others that help it achieve its growth goals.**

- a. Do you support continuing to provide funding to these organizations?**

Yes.

- b. Do you support continuing to fund the Affordable Housing Leverage Fund with the City's waterfall?**

Yes.

- c. What actions would you take to support job growth and site development?**

To support job growth and site development, I would take an approach rooted in partnership, innovation, and strategic investment. First, I believe the city should focus on streamlining permitting and approval processes to make it easier for developers and businesses to invest in Cincinnati. I have worked inside City Hall and I know we can remove bureaucratic delays and modernize outdated systems that make it harder to get projects off the ground.

Second, I would advocate for investments in workforce pipelines that match industry demand. As someone who has worked in workforce development and now leads strategy at United Way, I have seen how powerful it can be when we align training programs with real hiring needs. I want to expand these kinds of public private partnerships and focus on bringing more high growth sectors to Cincinnati.

Finally, we need to make sure growth is happening everywhere. Site development and business attraction should not be concentrated in just a few zip codes. I support expanding the tools we use, like tax abatements and infrastructure investments, in ways that bring life to overlooked commercial corridors and underserved neighborhoods. If we grow the pie while ensuring all communities have a seat at the table, Cincinnati will become not just a great place to live but a place to go to for talent, opportunity, and innovation.

6. Do you believe Cincinnati needs to grow? If so, what do you believe is Cincinnati's greatest opportunity for growth and what tools should City Council provide to make it successful?

Yes, Cincinnati needs to grow. A shrinking or stagnant city leaves fewer resources for services and fewer opportunities for families. I believe our greatest opportunity lies in growing both our population and our economic base, particularly by focusing on site development, housing, and workforce.

We should expand the use of tools like tax increment financing, infrastructure support, and site readiness investments to attract new employers and build up underutilized areas. City Council should streamline permitting and zoning processes to make development more predictable and efficient. We should also revisit outdated zoning restrictions that block housing and business density where infrastructure already exists.

Growth also means increasing our housing supply in every neighborhood. That includes supporting development, workforce housing, and incentives for nonprofit and developers. Finally, we need to expand partnerships that connect residents to high-demand jobs. That includes supporting job training, apprenticeships, and employer-led workforce initiatives

that grow our talent pipeline in healthcare, construction, tech, and advanced manufacturing.

I firmly believe growth is about welcoming new people and creating the conditions for current residents to thrive and for future residents to see Cincinnati as a smart place to build their lives and businesses.

- 7. Connected Communities was passed to increase housing supply through zoning reform. Do you support this policy? What additional zoning or land use changes, if any, would you support to add new housing in Cincinnati?**

I support Connected Communities because we need bold action to fix Cincinnati's housing shortage. Zoning reform is one of the clearest tools we have to unlock more housing near jobs and transit, and to allow more mixed-income housing in every neighborhood. I also support legalizing duplexes, triplexes, and accessory units citywide and simplifying the approval process for new affordable housing. We need to be proactive in creating more options for families to live and stay in our city.

- 8. In 2021 the Chamber released *Embracing Growth*, which laid out a number of policy recommendations. Since then, Council has considered a number of policies to increase housing supply.**

- a. What specific actions should Council take to expand housing of all kinds across the City?**

City Council should take a comprehensive approach to expanding housing of all kinds. That means investing in home repair programs so families can safely stay in the homes they already own, expanding access to first-time homeownership through down payment support, and working closely with developers to preserve and grow our housing stock. We also need to reduce barriers for new housing construction by reforming zoning, streamlining permitting, and identifying vacant or underutilized city-owned properties that could be put to better use.

- b. Would you restore the residential tax abatement program if presented with evidence that housing production has slowed?**

Yes. If the data shows a slowdown in housing production, I would absolutely support restoring a version of the residential tax abatement program. We need every tool available to meet our housing needs, and incentives like abatements can be effective when they're paired with strong equity standards. The goal should always be to drive growth while ensuring affordability and long-term benefit for our neighborhoods.

- c. What role do you believe that TIF districts should play in advancing the City's growth agenda? How do you think TIF funds should be utilized? What role should City Council play in prioritizing their use?**

TIF districts should be a tool to drive smart, equitable growth. When used well, they can help finance critical infrastructure, unlock private development, and bring opportunity to parts of the city that have been left behind. But we have to be intentional. Council should set clear priorities for how TIF funds are used, focusing on projects that create good jobs, support affordable housing, and strengthen neighborhood business corridors. We need more transparency in how these dollars are allocated, and we need to make sure residents see real results in their communities.

- d. How would you improve the city's permitting and development process?**

We need to modernize our systems and remove the friction that slows down responsible development. That starts with investing in technology to digitize more of our permitting process, so businesses and developers aren't stuck in outdated, manual systems. We also need clearer timelines and better communication between departments to prevent delays. As someone who has worked inside City Hall, I've seen how siloed processes can waste time and resources. I believe we can streamline approvals without compromising on accountability.

- 9. A number of development projects and policies in the last Council term have sparked debate over density, affordability, and neighborhood character. What responsibility does City Council have to advance pro-growth housing policy when individuals, advocates, or neighborhood organizations oppose specific projects, and how should Council weigh the importance of population growth and citywide housing needs against localized opposition?**

My campaign is built on opportunity, access, and trust. That third pillar, trust, is especially important when we talk about development. Local opposition often comes through the limited voices of neighborhood councils, which play an important civic role. I believe we should invest more resources into supporting those councils with training, staffing, and strategic tools so they can lead powerful work in their communities. But we cannot treat them as the gatekeepers for citywide growth.

As someone who serves on a neighborhood council, I know the pride residents take in their communities. I also understand that volunteers should not be expected to be development experts. Councilmembers have a responsibility to engage directly with residents, not just rely on intermediaries. Authentic community engagement means showing up, listening to people across the city, and being transparent about tradeoffs.

At the same time, Council must lead. We are in a housing crisis and we need more homes across every neighborhood. That includes areas with high opportunity and access to jobs, transit, and schools. Growth and inclusion can work together if we are intentional. By leading with transparency and supporting neighborhoods without freezing progress, we can ensure that Cincinnati grows in a way that lifts our residents.

10. The Chamber believes economic incentives have been essential to Cincinnati's growth. What role do incentives play in Cincinnati's future growth, and which types of projects do you think most warrant increased incentives?

Economic incentives have been essential to our growth and will continue to be a key tool for shaping the future of our city. Council must advance pro-growth housing and economic development policies both by offering smart incentives and by removing the red tape that slows progress. I believe incentives should be tied directly to public benefit. Projects that create long-term economic impact, job growth, and housing supply should receive the strongest support. That includes major housing developments, transformative downtown projects like the convention center, and catalytic investments in underserved neighborhoods. When done right, incentives can help Cincinnati become not just a great place to live, but a destination for talent, investment, and innovation.

11. Cincinnati's economy depends on attracting and retaining talent. What role should City Council play in ensuring we grow a skilled workforce and remain attractive to young professionals and families?

As the youngest candidate for City Council and a transplant myself, I know firsthand what brings people to Cincinnati and what makes them stay. We have the bones of a thriving

city. Our universities, hospitals, and employers are already drawing in talented people. But talent is mobile, and too many of my peers and colleagues have left for cities that feel more vibrant and full of opportunity. City Council needs to be proactive about growing and retaining a skilled workforce. That means expanding public-private partnerships that connect training programs to real jobs. It means continuing to invest in the things that make people want to put down roots like affordable housing, walkable neighborhoods, transit access, and strong schools. We also need to market Cincinnati not just as a great place to live but as a place where people can build careers, raise families, and belong. If we do this right, we will not just stop the brain drain. We will become a talent magnet.

12. Violent crime, quality of life issues, and residents' perception of safety are all pressing concerns in Cincinnati. What short- and long-term strategies or policies would you champion to improve actual safety and strengthen the community's sense of security, especially in the urban core? How would you measure success in both areas?

We can and should use data to inform how we address crime. Economic opportunity is inseparable from safety and especially from youth outcomes. I believe our long-term approach to public safety has to include investments in community schools, mentorship programs, and pathways for young people, whether or not they attend one of our universities. We need to fund youth programming in the skilled trades and expand partnerships that help young people see a future for themselves in this city. We also face a real perception of a safety issue. People need to feel secure walking around our neighborhoods and using public spaces. I believe Council should be hands-on in this work. That means showing up in our densest neighborhoods, supporting small businesses as economic anchors, and partnering with public safety officials, community leaders, and neighborhood groups to ensure the urban core remains vibrant, safe, and welcoming.

We should measure success both in terms of improved outcomes and community trust. That means fewer incidents of violence, more access to opportunity, and stronger collaboration between residents and city institutions. It also means more families and businesses choosing to stay and grow here.

13. What is one concrete way you would engage business leaders to improve public safety outcomes, and how would you ensure accountability?

Our team is already working on actionable steps to meet directly with businesses and hear their experiences and ideas related to safety. I believe the best way to engage

business leaders is through structured roundtables organized by neighborhood and industry. These gatherings would create space for consistent dialogue between city officials, public safety departments, and business owners. From those roundtables, we should track trends and publish regular public reports so business leaders and residents can see how their feedback is shaping solutions. Whether it's investing in lighting, adjusting police patrols, or increasing support for mental health responses, these conversations must lead to visible change. Accountability starts with follow-through. I would support creating a dedicated liaison role between Council and business districts to make sure concerns are not just heard but acted upon. Public safety is a shared responsibility and businesses are essential partners in making our neighborhoods places where people want to live, work, and play.

14. Cincinnati's small businesses are the lifeblood of neighborhood business districts. How would you support long time and new small business entrepreneurs?

I believe the city should use every tool we have to support small businesses, both new and long-standing. That starts with increasing access to city contracts and making procurement processes more accessible, especially for businesses owned by women and people of color. We also need to protect small businesses from city-created barriers like prolonged construction, limited parking, and traffic disruptions by planning ahead to minimize impact on the businesses that keep our neighborhoods thriving. Finally, I support expanding capital grant programs to help small businesses access the resources they need to operate and grow—from storefront improvements to equipment to working capital. Small businesses are not just economic engines, they are the anchors of our communities.

15. What is one existing barrier to growing small, minority, or women-owned businesses in Cincinnati, and what is the City's role in removing that barrier?

One of the biggest barriers facing small minority-owned and woman-owned businesses in Cincinnati is access to capital, especially for those that are close to scaling but not quite there yet. I've talked to business owners who are just shy of being able to bid on city contracts or expand to new customers, but they simply do not have the upfront resources to take that next step. That's why I'm a big advocate for direct capital support grants and flexible funding that can help small businesses grow capacity and unlock new revenue. While we currently offer things like marketing workshops and training programs, which are great, we need to complement those with more tangible support that helps businesses hire staff, upgrade equipment, or expand operations. The city has a real role to play in helping our local businesses not just survive, but scale.

- 16. The City funds arts, cultural institutions, and major events in different ways. Which types of cultural or tourism investments do you believe should be prioritized, and how would you pay for them?**

Cincinnati is a cultural titan. That includes our incredible museums and arts institutions, but it also means leaning into what makes us stand out today. Film and television production are growing fast in this city, and we should expand our support for it with targeted incentives, better infrastructure, and workforce pipelines that prepare local talent for careers in the industry. We also need to treat sports as part of our cultural economy.

Events like the Cincinnati Music Festival, the Flying Pig, and our growing soccer scene bring national attention and major economic impact to our neighborhoods. These moments build pride, attract tourism, and support small businesses all at once. I would look at public-private partnerships, event-based infrastructure planning, and smart use of city incentives to make sure these industries keep growing and benefiting the people who live here.

- 17. Solving major policy challenges, delivering efficient public services, and funding critical infrastructure projects requires the City to work with county, regional, state and federal leaders, some of whom are from different political parties. How will you engage these leaders to support the City's needs?**

In my work as a nonprofit executive, I have worked with Democratic leaders, Republican leaders, and Independent leaders across our state. When seeking good outcomes for our city and its residents, I am never going to consider the politics of the people I'm working with. I will intentionally build relationships with folks at all levels of government, regardless of their political background.