

MEEKA OWENS

Candidate for City Council – Responses

The Chamber reserves the right to publish responses to this questionnaire across various channels in the process of informing our members and the public about the election.

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 am running for re-election to continue to make progress for the City of Cincinnati. We are a city that has so much opportunity and I'm running again to help grow our city to be a place that ultimately people move to, where we attract and retain talent and a place where people want to visit. As I have always stated, Cincinnati has the right components to be a city that can lead the Midwest and the nation on many things; we have a strong business sector, strong philanthropy and a robust arts community, a government that is responsive, and nonprofits that help to provide critical resources for the community. We have accomplished a lot, but there's more to do and we work best when we solve problems together.

I was born and raised in Cincinnati, I've attended CPS schools, I raised my son here, I've been an entrepreneur, I've served the community in a variety of ways. I have always sought to collaborate with others to solve problems. If given the opportunity to serve another term on city council; I will continue to prioritize building housing, investing in neighborhoods and public safety, supporting small businesses and economic development, the environment and more. Overall, I hope to improve the quality of life for every resident in Cincinnati.

When we work collaboratively to improve the quality of life for all Cincinnatians, our city thrives.

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?

I appreciate the time that was taken from business leaders across the region to produce the Futures Commission report. A serious review of this set of comprehensive recommendations is critical for a fiscally sustainable Cincinnati.

I think one of the first steps is to address the recommendation around our water utility that is related to how we might make our pension solvent. We also need to have strategic goals around growth, and identify specific metrics that are measurable for our city, including the City's regulatory environment.

Ultimately, this work will need to be led by council and the mayor, the administration, and the business community, while engaging intentionally with the community at large. My office is prepared to further engage on recommendations around our water utility as a first step. I also think there is room for my office to lead on the creation of a formal response to the report and what steps we may be taking to address it. As I've stated publicly I am prepared to be a leader in creating the actions related to the Futures Commission recommendations.

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

I do support the creation of the Office of Strategic Growth. I believe accountability is important in achieving results and ensuring that we eliminate unnecessary bureaucracy is key. We should be making decisions based on data, metrics, and strategically laid out timelines. We are lucky as a city to have the resources to sustain a robust report from the Futures Commission, and it is on us to implement the recommendations in a timely manner to see our city thrive.

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

The entire set of recommendations should be taken into thoughtful consideration at this point. I believe we can approach the recommendations as a whole by discussing what should be prioritized based on our vision for the city as we grow into the next decade. It is important that we take a critical look at measures that increase revenues not only in the short-term but in the long-term.

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?

Public safety, housing, and infrastructure will always be top priorities for a city like Cincinnati. All three of these topics are centered in investments in people. Whether it is the way they live their lives, the place they rest their head, or the route they take to work.

We know these are important for our residents' quality of life. I'm grateful for the passage of Issue 22 to support infrastructure spending in our city. This is a huge step in ensuring better results as these investments are only getting more expensive. Having additional flexibility in infrastructure spending means we can invest in resources that will not only protect Cincinnati's workforce, but continue to promote growth in our city.

As a result of changing weather patterns, it is critical that we make preventive investments where we can. For example, in the last biennial budget I supported recommendations around preventative road maintenance and repair. I believe moving forward, climate investments that support more resilient and green infrastructure have to be a part of the conversation. As Chair of the Climate, Environment, and Infrastructure committee, I believe it is paramount to bring together diverse groups of stakeholders to ensure our climate investments are in alignment with a growing Cincinnati.

Public safety investments is another reason the recommendations of the Futures Commission have to be taken seriously. To best support increased personnel, capital investments, fleet, and technology, revenue has to be a part of the conversation. This is not only about worker safety, and dignity of work, but about having the personnel and infrastructure to support growing business opportunities for the City.

And finally, we need to continue to grow our city and in my time on Council I have been a constant advocate of increasing our housing stock while helping those who might be financially insecure stay in their homes through emergency rental assistance. I have also championed the creation of the Tenant Bill of Rights, which helps to support better conditions for renters in the city of Cincinnati parallel with the Ohio Revised Code.

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?

I do support an increase to the earnings tax. It definitely needs to be a part of a comprehensive growth conversation in this upcoming term. I would be open to looking at any additional increase beyond the recommendation in the Futures Commission that would support furthering economic development through increased housing production and small business growth. We need to look at increases that might go beyond the recommendation of just 10 years. One generation should not be responsible for the increase in taxes that will build the future of our city, rather I think we should have a focus that could reflect continuous growth.

As a member of council, of highest priority is the city's budget, as we are constrained by a looming deficit, and aging infrastructure, increased revenue to the general fund is central to that conversation.

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?

100%, absolutely. As a city, we need to continue to invest in organizations that are supporting the growth of our region at large. Not only do they attract residents and businesses to our great City, but they do so with data-driven solutions and a lens for tourism in mind.

I want our city to have enough housing units for those who live here now and those who want to live here, but more importantly I want the City of Cincinnati to be a location for the company that is looking to expand its reach in the Ohio River Valley and the midwest in general. REDI and the work that JobsOhio does to attract and retain talent are pivotal to ensure the health of our city's economy.

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

Yes. We need to continue to find creative ways to leverage community partnerships between Cincinnati Development Fund, Hamilton County and the City to build the affordable housing we so desperately need. Affordability is not only about creating housing access for the residents that are already here, but is about creating the vision of a future for young people graduating from our City's universities, and looking to build their lives in a great midwestern city.

You can look at models around the country where a strong Community Development Financial Institution has catapulted growth in cities; Cincinnati cannot afford to be any different. In addition, I want to see additional investment into our Affordable Housing Leveraged Fund. *I would be interested to see where other sources for the fund can be discovered. We need to look at fees, taxes, and programs that do not hinder the development process but rather are a wrap around for the services that already exist.* I believe we need to examine how we create additional revenue through potential sources like rental registration fees.

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

I led on revising our Human Services and Leveraged Support process this last year to make it easier for organizations like CincyTech and REDI to receive city funding. We know that for every dollar that the city puts in, the state matches.

We could not, and cannot, afford to have the energy of these important, job-creating organizations, spent on grant applications to the city for a service the city simply doesn't have the capacity to provide.

I also am in favor of streamlining permitting processes for the lots that might be available in the landbank. We have parcels and properties around this city that are dormant. I want to see these come to life, we just need to put forth the effort. Part of that effort is ensuring that we make the process for development accessible to all business owners looking to place their roots in Cincinnati.

We should have 20+ sites pad ready and open for RFP a year, minimum. I plan in this next term to prioritize the need to be prepared for the activity we want to see. I also support the industrial strategy of the PORT to help achieve these things. If we prepare, the investment will follow.

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?

Cincinnati needs to grow, but more importantly Cincinnati is growing for the first time in a long time and we can't afford to lose momentum. We are at an inflection point in our city where the 2020s can be defined by really intentional growth in all 52 neighborhoods. I believe one of the largest barriers to growth can be administrative processes, but I want to see that improve.

In my conversations in the community with Developers, I have heard that there is a need for additional incentives to get developments across the finish line. From comments in the development community I hear it is financial packages that are accessible. We need to do a deep dive on bonding capacity, our TIF districts (we are close to expiration), and other tools.

Other cities have found effective ways to revitalize aging housing stock like Philadelphia's Rental Improvement Fund which I have asked the City administration to see how we might be able to implement here in Cincinnati. This would help to invest in Cincinnati's aging housing stock while improving affordability through access to capital. This would require partnerships to help execute a program like this and the identification of a revenue source. But, we need to be visionaries. I like to say that as an elected official; we are governing the

city of today while building the city of tomorrow. We need to focus on our tomorrow a little more in these next two years.

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?

Yes, I voted in favor of Connect Communities proudly. I believe we need to see how we can increase density beyond the creation of permitted middle housing. I have also appreciated conversations around minimum lot size and how that could also help foster growth. Ultimately, we need to create opportunities for more starter homes and many other types of housing. Land use efficiency has to be in the conversation. I believe we need to have developers who come to the city with really ambitious ideas that move our city forward in a big way.

Additionally, I think we need to empower CDCs to do zoning studies for their communities. These are ways for communities to provide input on the front end on what they believe the best land use of their neighborhoods should be. As a city, we are lucky to have a robust network of CDCs, and it is on us to empower them with the tools to support their neighborhoods.

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?

We need to approve all forms of housing. Council is not in the business of negotiating development deals or generally outlining what type of housing we are looking for. We need to approve all housing from luxury to affordable, single-family to multi-family, apartment buildings and duplexes. We need to be aggressive in our approval of more housing at all income levels and all forms.

This comes in the form of incentivizing all forms of housing, and most importantly having housing and development friendly elected officials. Around the country we are seeing developments being downsized to accommodate “community opinion”, this is not helpful to achieving our housing goals and this starts at the elected and administrative level. I will push

the administration to present projects that are ambitious and will launch us in the right direction of growing our housing stock.

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

Every tool should be on the table to increase housing production. I supported our updated residential tax abatement policy to see these investments happen in other areas of the city. Abatement can also be a tool to help support investment in housing stock. If there was evidence presented that additional incentives are needed I would be in support. The most critical part of the conversation is using evidence-based recommendations for sustained growth for our city.

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?

The top priority of TIF funds should be and has been the development and revitalization of housing. We need to utilize them more effectively and not let TIF funds decrease the amount of funding that might come from a VTICA or CRA. *In the past, I have heard that there are multiple City incentives provided to a project that can lower the original request for TIF funds or a CRA. That is unacceptable, we need to provide as many incentives as possible to get projects over the finish line.* We need to be aggressive in incentivizing housing development and our TIF funds are a powerful resource to achieve that. I believe we need to create clearer guidelines on the use of TIF and be proactive in working with communities to identify the benefits of using them and the opportunities.

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

I believe creating plug and play contracts is really important. While the city administration will never take an external draft of an ordinance as the final draft we need to work with development firms to get our contracts done more quickly. I also believe we need to expand the capacity of all city departments that have a stake in the development process. Sometimes that means only DCED and B&I but there are also inputs from Law, and for example if it is a LEED project you can expect OES. We need to do more to ensure we have efficient processes.

Efficiency, and removing unnecessary bureaucracy is the key to a strong, growing city's success. The process for developers and expectations for developers should be clear upfront. I have heard from some developers that even having a consistent point of contact during the

stages of a project is impactful. We must streamline processes that touch multiple departments; like historic conservation.

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?

As stated previously we have a chance for the 2020s to be defined by intentional and incredible growth. This requires us to have a growth mindset, a vision that is audacious and the belief that we can create communities that are inclusive and have abundant housing. This requires us to not only align policies with that idea, but to share this grand vision as well. In addition, we need to create the best mechanisms to ensure credible and consistent engagement occurs. This engagement should be based on the benefits that communities will receive from good projects. The expectations of this engagement have to be clarified between the community and the city. We must also create the opportunity and environments where all voices can be supported. .

Lastly, it is not lost on me that the comments about neighborhood character carry history with them. Many people historically used similar arguments to segregate by class & race. We must confront this reality, but set a better course to achieve thriving, healthy and vibrant neighborhoods.

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?

We need financial incentives to aid in getting development projects across the finish line. They are paramount to the growth of our city and our region. During my time on Council, I reflect on some of the most transformative investments that we have made. The conversion of the Macy's Building, bond issuances for the new Convention Center district, and incentives for housing development in our neighborhood business districts. There needs to be an intentional focus on ensuring the growth of our urban core without losing sight of our neighborhoods. I think about the FC Cincinnati development that was recently awarded TMUD funding. That project welcomes a new entertainment district that bridges two

neighborhoods (West End and Over-the-Rhine) and will welcome new housing. We need to be prepared to support projects that are transformative now and into the future with incentives. I think about the upcoming need to support the construction of the convention center hotel. I, as a Councilmember, am prepared to support projects that grow the prominence of our city and region.

We should continue to use financial incentives like CRA's to invest in growth. Residential and commercial abatements are also proven tools that incentivize growth in key areas. I believe projects that ensure the production of affordable units should always be on the table.

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?

We need to create a city that retains those young professionals. At the top of the list, housing that is affordable to the young professional. I'll give you a prime example, both of my official side staff are transplants. One is from Louisville, the other from the Cleveland area. Both of these young people came here for college, they loved our city, and the social diversity the city had to offer. The ability to go to a Reds game or a concert at Riverbend are appealing to our younger residents.

But when the time came to find affordable and safe housing, one moved into an apartment on Queen City Boulevard and the other bought property in Colerain Township. This scenario is far too common.

We need to build a city that makes it affordable for young people to call our city. The median rents and cost of living need to come down. You can see it in the happy hours or the Banks on a Friday night. We have the young crowd but we need to retain them the easiest way possible; with a good paying job and an affordable roof over their head.

I also believe there is a focus that we must place onto our public school system and our higher education institutions. I want to see investment in our public schools increase. Every young person coming out of CPS should be ready to tackle the world. I want there to be a greater alignment with our higher ed institutions; UC and Xavier, to have an emphasis on retaining talent as well. I believe that if we work together with the business community we will see results. We should also be working with the school district on industry trends and where we might want to see investment in workforce and early training and education.

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?

On September 8th, I was proud to introduce legislation that would make a \$5.5m investment for public safety improvement. Through conversations with my colleagues we landed at \$5.42m but we started a million dollars lower than that. We need to be aggressive in addressing our issues around public safety and anything else for that matter. We need to define the story that our city tells and this short-term investment reflects that. I am a strong supporter of any resources the Cincinnati Police Department believes they need, including additional recruit classes. The long-term goal is to be at a full compliment of officers. We need to achieve that goal as quickly as possible, and retain them well into the future.

We can measure the success of those investments in two ways. First, is the immediate and long-term crime data. If we see a reduction in crime overall from these investments then we should be grateful for the improvement, but still flexible to continue investments. Second, is the public feeling and perception of safety. We get nowhere if people are not coming to businesses or enjoying parts of the city they deem dangerous. I heard from a local business owner in the wake of the 4th and Elm incident that their sales had decreased 60%, which is unacceptable. That is a powerful metric that we can use to see if our goals are being achieved.

In addition, I am willing to work with local creatives, community members and business leaders on how we re-shape the narrative that is most reflective of who Cincinnati really is. I believe social media can play a huge role here as well.

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

Accountability starts in city hall on this issue. We need to engage those who have stakes in our community; that means business leaders and residents alike. In the wake of the 4th and Elm incident, I held a meeting with over a dozen small businesses in OTR and the Central Business District to see what they might need in the form of extra safety and other support. I brought in CPD and DCED into the conversation as well. Some of the things we learned are how small businesses have seen a loss of business over the last few months because of perception. My plan is to reconvene this group in the coming weeks to get the resources they asked for. I will continue this type of round table dialogue, because it is only when we create opportunities to come together around the table that we find solutions.

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

We need to support relevant DCED programs like the Commercial Tenant Improvement Program and the PopUpShop program. These programs will empower neighborhood business districts and have been successful in supporting local small businesses. I hope that we can see the creation of a 52 main streets strategy across our city by the end of this decade. As an organizer and someone who likes planning events, I believe small business tours should be a strategy in highlighting and supporting local entrepreneurs. I would help to promote and grow initiatives like this.

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?

First and foremost, we as a city need to be invested in what success looks like for small businesses and how we define them. This should be rooted in data and metrics that keep us accountable. One of the most important things we can invest in are incubators that support scaled growth. We need to continue to support businesses from concept to execution and scaffold them with the ancillary tools that support growth. In my conversations around this topic, components from HR capacity to accounting are skills that entrepreneurs might not naturally have. Another barrier is access to the right capital at the right stage of the business. This is very important. Finally, when growth is supported in incremental ways we should also provide tools on how businesses can be supported by tech or be tech enabled.

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?

We need to support events that attract national talent and can highlight our city for years to come. That includes BLINK, Oktoberfest, River Roots, and more. However, alongside the annual events that bring enormous economic impact, we also need to find and sustain more consistent revenue sources.

For the smaller scale events there should be a special events fund established that the City Council can allocate to the events we want to support. With our investment in the Sports Commission we will need to be agile in how we get funds out the door to build capacity for these events as well.

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?

While the political commentary is meant to be distracting, we as leaders need to have a strategy of having an open chair and open ears.

An open chair meaning that we are willing to work with anyone. Personally, party affiliation is not a deterrent for me so long as those who I work with are also working to do the right thing for the City of Cincinnati. Open ears referring to our need as leaders to listen first.

I know that asking questions first can lead to greater information that can be helpful to the City of Cincinnati. By nature I am a collaborator and an organizer, and I approach all critical conversations with this lens in mind. We cannot afford for partisanship to get in the way of the progress of our city right now. As it relates to the topic of public safety, I have recently stood with Governor DeWine to show continued support of partnerships in how we address violent crime. Partisanship issues should never be brought up when it comes to quality of life issues or get in the way of what's best for Cincinnati