

Oakland City Council candidate questionnaire

Thank you for taking the time to complete The Oaklandside's 2020 election questionnaire. We understand we're asking a lot of you and your time, but we feel that Oakland voters deserve to know as much as possible about each candidate's views on major issues like housing affordability, homelessness, public safety, and more. We will be posting your answers to these questions on our website for our readers to see, and noting whether candidates chose not to respond. We are not endorsing anyone for office.

We'd like to receive your answers by August 28. Please briefly answer each question below using no more than 200 words. Please be as specific as possible when discussing policy ideas or positions you've taken, or would take, on different issues. Our reporters will also follow up with you for a phone or Zoom interview at some point.

Your name: Tri Ngo

City Council district seat you are running for:

We want to know more about you and the reasons you're running for council:

1. Please list your age, education, any professional licenses or other relevant credentials, your current occupation, and your neighborhood of residence.
 - 36 years old
 - BS, M.Eng, Electrical Engineering and Computer Science - MIT
 - PhD Biomedical Engineering - Johns Hopkins University
 - Tesla Engineer for 4 years
 - Currently freelance engineer
 - Living in Longfellow neighborhood

2. Before running for City Council, how were you involved in local government? Have you served on any local boards or commissions?
 - I have been involved in OpenOakland, a group focused on using technology to benefit Oakland's government.
 - I have also formed a team that is creating an online liquid democracy voting platform.
 - Not local government but I was a field organizer for Barack Obama in 2008 and volunteered for Bernie Sanders Presidential campaign in 2016. I have been deeply involved in campaign finance reform, volunteered for a Lawrence Lessig conference on campaign finance reform, was the founder and president of a

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citizen's group for campaign finance reform in Maryland and taught campaign finance reform at Occupy Baltimore.

3. What's your favorite restaurant or small business in your district—or somewhere you spend a lot of time? What's your favorite local park?
 - FOB Kitchen
 - Morcom Rose Garden
4. Where can voters get more information about your campaign?
 - www.votetri.com

Homelessness and housing affordability are issues that many Oaklanders rank high on their list of concerns, regardless of what district they live in.

5. Tell us what you think the root causes of Oakland's homelessness crisis are.
 - It is imperative that we understand housing, homelessness, and transportation are intrinsically linked, and need to be handled with a multifaceted, holistic set of policies. The lack of available middle income housing, which puts pressure on traditionally lower income neighborhoods, has caused some long-time Oakland residents to become unhoused, live in crowded unsustainable situations or leave the city. More than 50% percent of our homeless residents have been in Alameda County for more than 10 years. There are other root issues surrounding homelessness like access to services such as mental health and substance addiction, and many forms of historical racial inequity and trauma that are also fundamental roots of the issue.
6. What specific policies will you advance to address the homelessness crisis?
 - We have introduced CampAssist, a four-step pathway for those now in camps to move to permanent housing in 2-3 years, are introducing support for those "low need unhoused", at risk of losing their housing, and developing innovative ways to address the middle-income housing crisis. The four steps are 1) Support those living in encampments 2) Provide transition options to more permanent housing 3) Once semi-permanent housing has been obtained, proactively provide social services by partnering with nonprofit and private organizations 4) Ensure the city can provide a period of two years, time for the houseless resident to obtain education, job training, an income and transition to permanent housing.
 - Please see details about our homeless policy here:
https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1LF-_6lxbRDUzGPPdtmLymuyWXb5uhSZidmVrvlq7jJ4/edit?usp=sharing
7. When you think of the city's existing homelessness policies, what's working and what isn't?

- There are a number of folks working very hard at this problem and some great research has been done. We think the Tough Shed/Cabin program has seen a measure of success as a first step to get people off the streets. Many agencies' have put forth efforts to address the problem. However, overall homelessness has risen by nearly 50% in the last three years, according to the 2019 Everyone Counts PIT, and we are facing tremendous economic headwinds from the pandemic that will undoubtedly put more of Oakland's residents at risk of losing their housing. There needs to be an organizational effort to streamline partnerships with nonprofits and corporate entities that benefit from Oakland's diversity and environment, to focus those services and provide access to the homeless population. We should also look outward at cities like Salt Lake City and Houston that have implemented successful "Housing First" policies and adapt those to the specific needs of Oakland residents.
8. What are the root causes of Oakland's housing affordability crisis?
- I am the only candidate in this race that will not accept more than \$35 from any given donor and will create an online voting platform that will enable residents to vote on City Council affairs. This means our policies support the residents we represent in District 1 and are not influenced by wealthy donors. Traditionally, there has been a lack of focus on the missing middle in housing development. Middle income buildings nurture the ability of those like teachers, firefighters, support services and creative professionals to stay in Oakland and continue to contribute to the community. We support methods to increase middle income housing stock, as well as continued support for lower income affordable housing. Lack of income diversity in neighborhoods leads to starker inequity and contributes to other city issues.
9. What specific policies would you advance to address the affordable housing crisis?
- Our main goal is to ensure all residents have access to housing they can afford. Specifically, we are proposing a suite of policies called "housing for all," that include streamlining development for the missing middle, leveraging a tax on vacant large scale investment properties, and support for renters and homeowners affected by the pandemic. These will allow the housing stock to expand to support the people who live, or want to live, in our district while reducing pressure on scarce lower income housing. The focus is designed specifically to reduce displacement in traditional communities of color which threatens to permanently change Oakland's strong diversity and includes: 1) Building more middle income housing, with support for ADU's and subdivision of single family lots 2) Supporting a vacancy tax 3) Seek longer-term solutions for both renters and homeowners affected by the pandemic.

If elected, you'll likely have to balance the city's next budget, which has been negatively impacted by the pandemic.

10. What will you cut? Where will you find savings in the next budget?

- We will temporarily reduce salaries of personnel earning over \$125,000 a year, returning to original salary once the budget has recovered. We will have closer scrutiny on headcount increases, filling open positions, approving overtime. I will do a better job of evaluating whether or not expensive lawsuits initiated by the City of Oakland are worth the expenditure. I will seek resolution outside of the court system whenever possible. The advantage of representing a district which is so diverse is an opportunity to seek input from all perspectives. I will develop an accessible online platform to enable residents to weigh in on my votes. I will use my problem solving skills to ensure that government is accessible to all, not just those that have the time and money to engage. I am committed to ensuring equal representation in government and have a \$35 per person donation limit to ensure all voices are represented equally.

11. How might you find new sources of revenue to help the city make it through tough times and grow in the future?

- I would tax absentee owners and vacant property owners at higher rates to encourage sale of vacant properties. I would assess fees or penalties for lots or store fronts vacant long term, increasing the penalties or fees over time. I would temporarily increase property taxes of properties valued in the top 10% percent of all similar type properties (i.e., commercial, residential, multi-family, etc.) and temporarily assess fees on top 10% percent of rental units based on monthly rents. I would encourage the development of small businesses to all neighborhoods of Oakland. I would support small businesses owned by Oakland residents to hiring employees from the neighborhoods within which they operate. This will keep profits in Oakland and spending in Oakland benefits our community more than online purchases. All Oaklanders should be able to walk or bus to shopping in their neighborhoods.

12. What will your budget priorities be? What services or projects will you ensure receive a growing share of the city budget?

- My priorities will be funding for mental health services with lower barriers, programs which provide economic opportunity for low or no income individuals and universal basic income. This needs to be balanced with the needs of other city programs such as education, small business support, and homelessness. Funds should be allocated using an equity-minded net benefit approach. My prime goal is to foster “government for all” which represents the needs of our diverse constituents throughout District 1 and Oakland as a whole.

There are three measures specific to Oakland on the ballot this year. Tell us briefly why you support or oppose each.

13. Strengthening the Oakland Police Commission and making it more independent.

- I support the Oakland Police Commission (PC) but would increase its transparency and accountability to the people. This lack of transparency and accountability is due to a convoluted appointment process split among Councilmembers and the Mayor.

The City Auditor has said that the responsibilities given to the PC are too much for an all-volunteer board. I agree. And whatever the reasons for firing the police chief, the lack of transparency and accountability for the PC created major controversy.

I am 100% in favor of civilian oversight of the police department and I do support giving it additional power if there was restructuring. A better structure would be 3 to 5 paid commissioners, directly elected by the people of Oakland. I would be in favor of giving an elected commission complete control over the police - from the chief on down - removing them entirely from the mayor's purview. The council would maintain arm's length control via the budget.

14. Allowing anyone 16 and older to vote for Oakland Unified School District directors.

- I fully support allowing anyone 16 and older to vote for Oakland Unified School District directors. By 16 years old, the ability to make decisions void of emotion, based on facts and evidence, are nearly fully developed. 16 year olds are already treated as adults in some instances. 16 year olds can get a license to drive a car and 16 year olds are tried as adults in some cases. Enabling anyone 16 and older to vote will increase political engagement and will help form a lifelong habit of voting, essential to a strong democracy.

15. Removing the \$1,000 cap on fines for ordinance violations.

- A \$1,000 fine is a lot of money in some cases, and insufficient in others. The rationale for removing the cap is essentially that large corporations could treat the existing fines as the cost of doing business, which is not the intention. I am in favor of removing this blanket cap to strengthen our regulatory power. In addition, I am generally in favor of reducing the number of laws we have on the books, but being sure to enforce the ones we keep. This approach increases legal clarity and reduces the amount of discretion wielded by the police and prosecutors.

The City Council voted on some controversial and major policies over the past six months. Please tell us how you would have voted on the following, and what you think the next steps should be:

16. The council adopted the goal of reducing the Police Department's share of the general fund budget by 50% in the 2021-2023 budget.

- I am firmly in favor of reimagining the role of police and providing other services that prevent the police from being used as a catch-all emergency service. The

current task force and the 50% reduction goal will force the police to justify their budget and ensure their responsibilities align with the needs of the community.

17. The council approved a moratorium on residential evictions until the end of the COVID-19 emergency.
 - I fully support a moratorium on residential evictions for the duration of the pandemic. Some council members chose to abstain on this important issue which I feel does not signal a sense of community. While the moratorium is an imperfect solution, we needed to act fast. However, we cannot forget that as this pandemic continues, many District 1 homeowners are increasing in a precarious position as well. I would like to propose a more comprehensive set of protections, taking into account the downstream effects of reduced rent revenue, that support all District 1 residents.
18. The council strengthened rent control and Just Cause eviction protections and Oakland's Tenant Protection Ordinance.
 - I would have supported this bill. I would like to see a more comprehensive bill pass that takes into account the risks faced by first-time homeowners as well. Property ownership has been elusive from communities of color, and is a fundamental factor in long term income inequality and stability for many in District 1 communities.
19. The council rejected a plan to reform Oakland's business tax by changing it from flat tax rates to a progressive tax in which bigger companies with higher gross receipts would pay more.
 - The idea of the more progressive tax structure is a good one, but the tax rates being discussed were excessive. The proposal floated would have increased taxes on our largest corporate "residents" like Clorox and Kaiser by 10x. It is not that hard for these companies to move to Walnut Creek if Oakland over-taxes them. That employee base leaving Oakland would be devastating to small businesses downtown.
In any case, this is not the time to impose new taxes that could harm small businesses, which are extremely fragile if not already destroyed by the pandemic. I agree with the council's decision to reject this plan for now.
20. The council voted to create a pilot program to send unarmed civilians to respond to nonviolent mental health crises, instead of the police.
 - I support the use of unarmed special trained civilians in dealing with nonviolent mental health crises. What's confusing about this pilot is the fact that such a program already existed: the OPD's Mobile Evaluation Team (MET). This team consists of mental health professionals from the County (healthcare is primarily the county's purview) paired with OPD officers, who wear logo polo shirts rather than standard uniforms and essentially provide backup. This program was likely

underfunded and much too small, but apparently successful when used. MET was arresting people in only 2% of calls when statistics were last published. We must also ensure the safety of civilians sent to respond to these crises. Mental health wards in hospitals have security guards who use physical force when necessary, because a mental illness crisis cannot always be safely de-escalated. Of course, in-ward security would never carry firearms, but some kind of physical security is needed for these calls.

City Councilmembers reps will need to make big decisions on more hot-button issues in the coming year. How would you handle the following?

21. Should the city permit the A's to build a new ballpark at Howard Terminal in D3 or keep the ballpark in D7 near the Coliseum?
- I would prefer to lease the Coliseum property to the Athletics to preserve long term income. However, the pandemic has cash strapped Oakland so I would consider a sale if the terms were favorable to the city. These terms are 1) agreeing to build a ballpark on the Coliseum property 2) The project should give priority to hiring Oakland firms, Oakland small businesses and Oakland residents. As the only candidate limiting campaign contributions to \$35, my decisions will not be influenced by large campaign donors and I can be trusted to represent the needs of the community. I do think that it is important to keep the A's in Oakland, even more so now that the Raiders and the Warriors have left. The A's are a source of pride to our residents and are a unifying force with fans in the hills and in the flatlands.
22. Should the city keep fighting the proposed coal terminal in West Oakland, or permit the developer to build it?
- While I would like to see the legal conflict be ruled in favor of the City of Oakland's attempt to block the shipment of coal through Oakland, this has been a costly legal battle. Should we lose the conflict in the courts, I will seek out a resolution through different means. The health of our citizens is paramount and we must impose fees that offset the negative externalities of shipping coal out of Oakland. In the long term, Oakland must be a leader in addressing the climate crisis. In the long term, we cannot support the use of coal as a fuel anywhere in the world.

Tell us about how you'll improve public safety.

23. What's your approach to reducing gun violence? What specific policies or tools will you advance that will save lives? More police? More non-police services? Please be specific.
- The City has made good progress over the last 7 years in this area. One example is Operation Ceasefire which is a collaboration between multiple city departments and community organizations. It laser-focuses services on specific individuals

who are most likely to commit violence, and also lets these individuals know that they are known to police and will be arrested if they commit violence.

- Obviously the police have a role to play in combating firearm-related crimes - for example, finding and seizing illegal guns - but Operation Ceasefire has proven that adding in non-police services is not only more effective, but makes the police more effective too. This approach is focused on prevention rather than arresting people after the fact, even though the latter is still sometimes necessary.
- This approach is targeted primarily at people who our social systems, including education, foster care, and others, have already failed. So while supporting and expanding Operation Ceasefire is incredibly important, addressing the earlier causes of violence by improving education and other social services for children, is just as important.

24. Too many of Oakland's streets are dangerous for pedestrians, bicyclists, and drivers.

What policies will you advance that will improve transportation safety?

- The well-known designer and architect David Sim has coined the term "soft city" to describe a city built and designed to make it more efficient, more livable, and better connected to the environment. I believe Oakland has made many good steps in this direction. The Safe Streets that were created in response to covid should be evaluated within the communities, to see if it makes sense for some to become permanent and if we want to add more. Creating more outdoor space and access-equity for commercial zones, so small businesses can thrive, will be another imperative. Finally, as councilmember, I will focus on increasing public transit and diversifying options for people to get around.

How will you help Oakland workers and businesses thrive?

25. What specific policies will you advance to help Oakland workers who struggle with low wages, exploitative employers, and the uncertainties of the gig economy?

- We must ensure all Oakland workers have the opportunity for a job that affords a good standard of living. I do not support Prop 22 because it will label Uber and Lyft drivers as independent contractors instead of employees as required by AB 5, depriving them of minimum wage and benefits. Currently rideshare companies only pay for time that drivers spend driving and not waiting for a rider, which can be substantial. I support policies that account for the entirety of the time a worker is on the job.
- We must encourage competition within the rideshare industry, to provide workers with alternatives to Uber and Lyft.
- We must also help workers fight against exploitation by giving them real choice. We must strengthen their competitiveness in the job market with retraining and education programs. Finally, we must consider Universal Basic Income as low skilled jobs are increasingly replaced by automation and provide a safety net for all residents so they are not forced to work in exploitative jobs.

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26. How will you help small and local businesses succeed, especially with the recession caused by the pandemic?

- I will encourage the development of small businesses owned by Oakland residents, hiring employees from the neighborhoods within which they operate. This will keep profits in Oakland and encourage spending in Oakland which benefits Oakland. I will support small businesses through social media and city approved neighborhood events to feature small businesses. I will ensure minority and women owned businesses are supported through loans/grants, and guidance in navigating requirements for beginning a business in Oakland. Finally I support public banking as another source of funding for small businesses.