

# 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:** Zoe Lopez-Meraz

**City Council district seat you are running for:** District 5

**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.
  - a. 28 years old. B.S. in biochemistry and molecular biology. Unemployed by choice since July. I live in Jingtletown.
2. Before running for City Council, how were you involved in local government? Have you served on any local boards or commissions?
  - a. I participated in city council weekly meetings to voice concern over police brutality, homelessness, and budget appropriations. I have seen local government fail the working class, unrecognized workers, and marginalized repeatedly. I didn't see or hear anyone that looked like me, the people I care about, or voiced the issues we are facing with any concrete solutions, so the extent of my participation remained in public comment.
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?
  - a. My favorite establishments are Guadalajara, Reems, and Red Bay Coffee. I really appreciate Radically Fit as a small, local business that advocates for queer representation, health, and body positivity. My favorite place to hang out outside

is the Lake Merritt amphitheatre; I wish we had better public parks with more green space.

4. Where can voters get more information about your campaign?
  - a. zlm4oak.org @zlm4oak on Instagram and @zoelopezmeraz on Twitter

**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.
  - a. A lack of rent control: rents increase criminally as wages stay frozen. Corporate investors: Oakland continues to allow multimillion dollar companies to gobble up residential property (and leave them vacant and unmaintained) instead of creating pathways toward individual home ownership. Delayed tax reform: commercial landlords do not pay the same rate in taxes as the working class, putting the burden on the middle-class and poor. A lack of comprehensive healthcare: mental health services are not available for people that need it in order to reach a place of stability to hold a job and pay their rent. Affordable versus subsidized housing: Oakland prioritizes affordable housing over subsidized housing, which come with many financial barriers for well-meaning developers and allows for further discrimination of housing vouchers. The gig economy: the numbers of unrecognized workers increases as tech companies rake in billions by exploiting unpaid labor.
6. What specific policies will you advance to address the homelessness crisis?
  - a. Universal rent control for all residential units. Emergency mortgage protections for homeowners. Progressive tax reform for corporate and commercial landlords and tech/gig companies. A three step housing path: 1) wrap-around services at homeless encampments, along with city sanctioning; 2) protections for section 8 vouchers and the use of empty hotel rooms as emergency housing; and 3) working with programs like ACCE and community land trusts to guide people toward home ownership with all the empty inventory Oakland has.
7. When you think of the city's existing homelessness policies, what's working and what isn't?
  - a. I can't say anything is working; the numbers continue to rise, and we are about to see a mass eviction at the end of the moratorium. Conditions at encampments are heartbreaking: I have seen simple infections turn into gangrenous, life-threatening events due to a lack of healthcare access; residents are forced into drug and sex trafficking by violent perpetrators; there are many fires caused by people trying to stay warm or cook food in uninhabitable dwellings; porta potties and handwashing stations are not maintained and have been unusable for months; and the public continues to perform illegal dumping.

8. What are the root causes of Oakland's housing affordability crisis?
  - a. A lack of rent control as wages have remained frozen and far from a living wage in contrast with a rising housing market caused by corporate speculators. Housing earmarked as "affordable" has unrealistic income limits. Affordable housing developers face huge financial barriers, including utility mitigation fees that the city uses to not do the maintenance themselves. This is a very complex issue that I learn more about through each discussion with those working in this field for decades and I am eager to keep learning more.
9. What specific policies would you advance to address the affordable housing crisis?
  - a. To start, I would like to learn more about why the plan check fee is \$1.5 million for affordable housing developers, and where this and the \$400k affordable housing fees are going. There is something fishy in city financials and there should be a lot of money available to not have such a housing and homelessness crisis. I need to learn more about this issue with leading professionals and impacted citizens to really understand target areas for policy.

**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?
  - a. I would cut the police department budget but the exact amount requires data that the city administrator and auditor don't seem to have available. Savings, but more importantly revenue, can be generated with tax reform that finally taxes commercial landlords, corporate residential landlords, and tech companies at their fair rate.
11. How might you find new sources of revenue to help the city make it through tough times and grow in the future?
  - a. As mentioned a couple times now, tax reform for the very rich.
12. What will your budget priorities be? What services or projects will you ensure receive a growing share of the city budget?
  - a. Housing programs that get folks into long term housing and ownership. Boosting our public schools so they can have the technological and staff support they need to thrive. Public parks and spaces to have healthy, safe places to congregate. And supporting public services that increase neighborhood quality of life.

**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.

- a. Support. We need independent, civilian oversight to report on police department misconduct to avoid more corruption.
14. Allowing anyone 16 and older to vote for Oakland Unified School District directors.
- a. Support. The youth impacted by the OUSD directors should have a vote in who represents them.
15. Removing the \$1,000 cap on fines for ordinance violations.
- a. I don't know much about this but ordinance violations seem like an easy way to fine homeowners or squatters that cannot afford to maintain property to code and they should not be fined for that at all, let alone move to remove a cap on fines. I would like to learn more about how this is enforced, who it impacts, and where the money is allocated to.

**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 would have supported this vote. Next steps should be further pressing city auditor and administrator for current, accurate recordkeeping to more strategically shape budget.
17. The council approved a moratorium on residential evictions until the end of the COVID-19 emergency.
- a. I would have supported this vote but we need to be advocating for rent and mortgage cancellation. If someone cannot afford rent this month, why do we think they will come up with all backdue rent at the end of this emergency? It is in landlord and renter's best interest to cancel rent and mortgage payments.
18. The council strengthened rent control and Just Cause eviction protections and Oakland's Tenant Protection Ordinance.
- a. I would have fought for rent control that is at the same rate as wage increases (i.e. rent increase percentages must correlate with wage increases). Seeing as that the housing wage in Oakland is \$40 an hour, these rent control policies do little to actually keep people housed. While Just Cause protections are important, we are seeing the failures in not planning for emergencies as "failure to pay rent" is a just cause for eviction. With so many Oaklanders out of work since March, failure to address this weakness will result in a massive increase in evictions very soon.

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.
  - a. I would have voted in favor of this long overdue progressive tax reform. A flat tax increases the wealth disparities we see year after year.
20. The council voted to create a pilot program to send unarmed civilians to respond to nonviolent mental health crises, instead of the police.
  - a. MACRO was developed without consulting with system impacted citizens. While Oakland greatly needs a program like this, it must come with input and guidance from impacted people and leading professionals. APTP has a great model developed with the community that they piloted in Sacramento and is now in Oakland as of last Friday.

**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?
  - a. Public land must be used for public good. I know that's an easy tagline but it's a moral soundbite that is easy to digest because it is true. The Coliseum area is not only a better location in regards to transportation and accessibility, but also deserves more investment from the community to stop the gentrification of Jack London and bring jobs and services to the underserved area of the Coliseum. Traffic congestion will be a big issue at the Howard Terminal; the Coliseum already has a BART stop and ample street access and parking. Truck drivers that receive goods at the terminal are already finding it difficult to park and keep up with the flow of commerce; further development will further congest this transfer of goods.
22. Should the city keep fighting the proposed coal terminal in West Oakland, or permit the developer to build it?
  - a. Yes; we must take a stand against the further pollution of West Oakland and advocate for funding of renewable energy production.

**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.
  - a. Violence increases when needs are not met. We continue to allow the cycle of crime by not providing basic human rights. Until there is a path for all toward long term affordable housing, secure jobs, better schools, more green spaces, and restorative justice programs, we will continue to see the effects of not funding

vital public services. We must fund non-police services that address all these issues at the root cause or else we continue to spend money on band-aid initiatives that don't actually change the lived experience of the system impacted.

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

What policies will you advance that will improve transportation safety?

- a. We must work with city planners on affordable and effective ways to upgrade Oakland to be more pedestrian friendly. Every time I have a conversation with a city planner I am surprised at the tactics used for pedestrian safety and do not have the exact answers myself but will work with professionals using proven data to make these changes.

### **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?

- a. I will support existing policy like the Good Jobs Policy and advocate for all new development and large corporations that come into Oakland to enforce similar policy before being approved to build or start business here. The housing wage in Oakland is \$40 an hour; you must make that much to afford rent here. Councilmembers just make it into that bracket. We must fight against exploitative employers by creating policy that recognizes workers as employees, protects their right to organize, and penalizes businesses that don't comply.

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

- a. We must allocate zero-interest direct financial assistance for small businesses affected by the pandemic to rebuild. The application procedure must be accessible and non-burdensome. We can work with state funding (especially by voting for policy like Prop 15) to boost our small, local economy. Oakland's port is the 5th largest in the U.S. It is in everyone's best interest to boost the local economy and understand the importance of every step in the production and consumption chain.