



Empower Oakland 2025 Candidate Questionnaire

Oakland City Council District 2 Special Election, 2025

Empower Oakland is a movement fueled by Oakland residents who recognize that “business as usual politics” will only further perpetuate Oakland’s downward spiral. We believe in empowering Oaklanders to amplify their collective voices for greater political impact and influence.

Empower Oakland is asking candidates to complete a short questionnaire. These submissions will be published on empoweroakland.com to educate Oakland voters and will be unedited for spelling and grammar. Empower Oakland will also use candidate submissions to help inform their candidate endorsement process. Candidates may be asked to interview in-person with the Empower Oakland Endorsement Committee. Final endorsement decisions will be made in mid-February.

*Please email the completed questionnaire as a .docx or .pdf document to info@empoweroakland.com by **5pm on Monday, January 27th**. Please include a headshot (square/vertical headshot, in JPG or PNG format, 1000-1500px and <2MB, and please name the file).*

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Social media handles:

- X:
- Facebook: Harold Lowe for District 2 City Council
- Instagram:
- LinkedIn:

Expected total fundraising amount: \$90,000

Funds raised to date: \$22,300

Background & general questions

1. What is your background in Oakland? How have you been involved in local government? What specific experiences do you have across housing, homelessness, public safety, public infrastructure, budget, and good government?

I'm a 4th Generation Oaklander. My family has been in Oakland since the 1910's. I was born at Highland Hospital, just about 1 ½ miles from my home today, that my Oakland raised wife and I have lived for 27 years. I'm a 3rd generation Oakland public schools'



kid, and our children are the 4th; two are in college (Georgetown and Howard U) and one is in middle school. In addition to participating in dozens of Oakland organizations (I'm currently a Scoutmaster, and I founded a Cub Pack, a girls' scout troop and boys' troop), I have served in a variety of City, Oakland Unified Schools, Alameda County volunteer and appointed positions. I was the first Chair of the Oakland Youth Advisory Commission, and I was the Chair of the OUSD Measure G Committee, for example. My experiences with the issues mentioned are both personal and professional. I served as Executive Director for the National Association of Minority Contractors, Northern California, where I participated in a variety of functions and advocacy roles related to the creation of affordable, low income, and market rate housing issues, and these housing issues often overlapped with homelessness challenges. I was Board Chair at PEERS, (Peers Envisioning and Engaging in Recovery Services) where I expanded the impact of support for at-risk residents and mental health support in Oakland; when I joined the board our budget was \$151k and \$126k was dedicated to salaries; 7 years later when I left the organization, our budget was \$3 million. I joined HealthRight 360 and became Board Treasurer during the merger of Walden House and Haight Ashbury Free Clinics to form the new organization, playing a key role in the \$70 million consolidation of services and policy support for homeless, re-entry, and the underserved communities without medical insurance. I worked for the US Census Department during the 2020 count for Alameda and Contra Costa Counties, when we were devising security measures to count the unhoused during the pandemic, and I was able to see the impact of homelessness and how the federal government validates and misses the mark in documenting the crisis. My experience with housing is also personal; my mother lost our home due to foreclosure when I was a teen, and my family experienced homelessness. She also lost another rented home due to fire in the San Antonio district, and once again, being displaced. I've been reviewing the Oakland budget since my studies in Public Administration at Cal State Eastbay, over 20 years ago, and have advised organizations and leaders from my reviews. While in graduate school, I researched violence prevention organizations, as I prepared the list of all violence prevention organizations in Alameda County for the office of Supervisor Nate Miley. I am a Team Member with the Link21 Program to connect transit systems of 21 Bay Area and Northern California counties and a supporting member to our company's consulting team as we work with the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority, and the Sacramento Airport expansion project. As a part of these work experiences, it has been my job to offer good government policy solutions for City, County, Regional, and State leadership. I have been a financial planner since 2003, and I have reviewed personal and organizational budgets during this period, also serving as volunteer treasurer to Oakland Rotary #3, The Calculus Roundtable, Pro Arts Gallery, among other organizations. Again, I have personal experiences with violence in Oakland and how it intersects with transit, like so many. In less than two weeks, it will be the 30th anniversary that my



8-year-old half sibling was killed by a drunk driver as he crossed the street along Foothill Blvd.

2. What are the top two challenges facing Oakland today? What are the bright spots?

Leadership and Economic Sustainability are the top challenges in Oakland today. Over the last two election cycles, most of our leadership has supported a fraction of Oakland while refusing to work with internal and external partners based solely on ideological lines, ultimately ignoring most residents, business, and regional partnerships in favor of special interest groups which support limited policies. Our leadership has determined the course of our fiscal problems and gravely miscalculated the significance of supporting public safety with law enforcement who are accountable to the public, versus handpicked nonprofit agencies which have not been accountable or transparent to the community in terms of their effectiveness and financial expenditures. Our economic problems are twofold; spending resources without the financial position to cover the cost of those resources, and the losses of present revenues with businesses leaving due to unsafe conditions, and future revenues by the virtue signaling that Oakland is not going to protect new or existing investment, causing an exodus of businesses and high net worth residents, not to mention potential businesses to bypass us altogether. The bright spots are that there has been a gradual change in governance, with independent leaders coming in with a track record in business and community, willing to work for the best interests of the City. Also, the public is weighing in a decisive way on this trend by demanding more accountability from leadership.

3. Why are you running for office and why are you uniquely qualified to fulfill the office you are running for at this time?

This current crisis in leadership and in long planning are daunting, and I believe that we are at the edge of bankruptcy. We need serious people to lead us out of this. Unfortunately, in a time when we need more qualified, more principled people, we've often been attracting the opposite, and this was no more apparent than during the pandemic. We were unable to recover because the leadership wasn't prepared for the moment. And we have good people in Oakland, some of the most qualified in the nation, but they won't stand up. One of the reasons why we cannot get good people to run is that the political machinery has made it difficult for new, pragmatic, independent people to have a voice, and the vitriol that well-meaning people experience is a turn off. We have turned away part of the next generation of leaders needed to fix real problems. I have been on the other side of evaluating candidates and policies for 20 years, and the quality of the candidates is getting worse. We need people with demonstrated financial acumen in reviewing, analyzing Oakland's data and experience with direct engagement with our institutions, while also needing people with success in developing business and industry, and add in the paramount importance for people who know Oakland and have the ability to showcase and promote our city to investors, to families. I have proven that I am able to support these efforts and fix things, not through rhetoric but in my history. No amount of planning can work if you're not qualified, not experienced, not in it for the right



reasons. Any one variable out of balance and we're in a lot of trouble. Also, the current leadership is living with the mess of those who left, and needs someone with institutional history to support them. Of the 5 leaders (4 City Council and the Mayor) who left their positions last month, only one of them had for-profit experience. Of their 159 years of working history (starting at age 21), only 20 years include for-profit work, and 19 of those years the leader served as a spokesperson, with 11 years in utilities. In a twist, one of these leaders, with no business experience, is serving as interim Councilmember in the district. We need help. I'm running because I am old enough to remember the greatest Oakland offered, and I am put in the decades to this city, and I am young enough to have vitality and not be jaded enough to know that my efforts will make a huge difference. I'm not a unicorn, but I'm as close as one can get who meets this criteria—I was born in the district and never left Oakland. I'm college educated in the history and economics of African Americans and underserved peoples and studied public administration in graduate school. My professional experiences have been varied, but most centered to champion and recruiting and promoting underserved college students and graduates to Fortune 1000 corporations, leveraging educational options at universities, devising financial plans for individuals and small businesses, creating a company to take a new approach at how we evaluate those with credit, and advocating for union jobs and minority businesses often left out of the construction industry. My community service roles are also as varied, and I cannot find another candidate who has spent more time in more different roles to support Oakland's youth, business, and education than me. If anyone had half the experience I do in this race, I would have stepped aside to raise my children, pay for college, and volunteer. They don't, so I'm here.

4. This special election is for a shortened term, making it crucial that the winning candidate can be effective immediately. What concrete steps are you taking to prepare, and what will be your strategy for making an impact in this shortened time frame?

I am fortunate to have experienced this timeframe in the previous election, as I was the only person to run against the incumbent in 2022; I understand the runway, and I am working with my networks to re-engage the community. I have plans for outreach using a variety of actions, including in-person, mail and digital communication. I will have an online presence with a robust website, I will have regular communication updates; I have campaigned 40 hours a week in the past, going door to door, scheduled parties, phone banking, forums and in front of affinity groups. I won't discuss the actual steps here, however...

Public safety

*The following questions ask for your perspective on improving **public safety** in Oakland.*

5. What specific and measurable improvements in public safety will you deliver for Oaklanders over the next two years? What existing investments would you increase, reduce or eliminate to ensure adequate resources for you to meet your goal?

The first improvement is to pull data and resources to discover our true baseline. We



don't have an accurate means to determine key factors in Oakland, such as crime reporting, so we cannot know where we are until we have an agreed to start. I am astonished that leadership thinks we can go from a cold start to ramping up public safety resources; our historical data over the last two cycles shows that we lose 5 officers monthly; if this is the case, having two academies annually will only keep us at a constant. I am going to work with my colleagues to increase our officer ranks.

6. Please speak to the effectiveness of Oakland's non-sworn responses to public safety issues. Which, if any, are successful and should be continued? Which, if any, are not successful and should be discontinued?

The first question should be to determine if their role is what was intended from the start? Most of us believed that MACRO and other programs (ambassadors) were necessary because police (and fire) were being called for issues that were not part of their core duties, and this divergence led to community angst, and time wasters for them to support critical/lifesaving needs. We were sold on the idea that these non-sworn responders would be able to handle less sensitive issues. However, it seems that these roles have been filled by people with far less formalized training than officers and firefighter/paramedics; that these folk are unable to deescalate conflict, they have no authority to confront hostile environments, so they have to call in police officers to any hostile situation and there is now a cost for two responding departments. These roles have morphed into engagement with the unhoused communities only. We still have no credible evaluation of the programs, no details of their call ratios/call times/response records, no understanding of their currently defined roles, no accountability to the public. I am amazed that laymen are asked to determine how police officers should do their jobs, but we don't ask the same of these responders; I haven't heard of the number of people trained with psychology, sociology, ethnic studies backgrounds in the field, for example . With no answers, community members make up their own narratives, leading to outsiders determining that the program is 3x more expensive than the average police officer cost to the city, and we have no data to contradict this. In fairness, we'll need to get information before making determinations, but if we must make budget decisions, we should start with nice to have services versus what we must have in terms of critical responders to maintain public safety.

7. What is the appropriate staffing level of sworn police officers for the City of Oakland?

All credible references—my conversations with three former police chiefs, two of which I consult for advice--a review of similarly sized cities and cities with similar crime statistics suggest that we need 1100-1400 officers to meet appropriate staffing levels. What we are doing now is still staffing at those levels at a tremendous cost; our officers meet the 1100-person need by doing overtime. Yet now we're subject to having a tired, overworked police force to engage the community, which in the long term is disastrous; I don't want overworked people carrying guns and responding to split second conflicts.

8. What strategies would you prioritize to address crimes like gun violence, retail robbery, sex trafficking, bipping, residential burglary, traffic violence, and any others?



This is such an important question, that these are truly 4-5 questions rolled into one, and it isn't quite fair to the argument to answer so briefly. The use of a gun in any situation is a different level of violence, whether a shot is fired or not. We've had leaders minimize that import because no one was shot; well, tell that logic to an elderly person, or parent walking their child on the street after someone pulls a gun on them—if a gun is pulled on you, you are changed forever. That should be met with a standard that all people understand. The first action is to enforce the rule of law as it relates to motor vehicles. If we know that a significant amount of criminal activity involves the use of motor vehicles, then reasonable people should be able to agree that motor vehicles should not be operated in Oakland on our streets without license plates and current registration. It is not a stretch to ask for someone driving a 2-ton vehicle to be qualified and verified to operate it either. I will work with our law enforcement agencies in Oakland, the County and surrounding cities in coordination and collaboration, and continue to support the state involvement with CHP. We need to invest in new technologies which allow for the solutions that augment the work of police. I am a big proponent of going after those who harm our most vulnerable in sex trafficking, and unlike the other candidates, I propose that we ignore amend or disregard the limitations in SB 421, as the discriminatory aspect of arresting people involved in sex cases is overshadowed by the impact these acts have in places like the San Antonio and Fruitvale, and now Lake Merritt. While we are not talking about remediation or support or youth engagement, we need to make this a staple as part of the policy on enforcement. Organizations such as OK Program in Oakland provide amazing opportunities to break the cycle.

9. Taking into account Oakland's governance structure, what specific steps would you take to align council, staff, OPD, the City Administrator's office, the community, and other stakeholders around your public safety priorities?

Homelessness and housing affordability

*The following questions ask for your perspective on **reducing homelessness and improving housing affordability** in Oakland.*

10. What specific and measurable improvements in Oakland's homelessness and housing affordability crisis will you deliver for Oaklanders over the next two years? How do you plan to deliver these homelessness and housing affordability wins for Oakland? What investments might you advance, reduce, or eliminate to ensure adequate resources are available to meet your housing and homelessness goals?

Oakland cannot solve the housing crisis; there are 500k fewer units in the Bay Area than are needed to improve our situation. Moreover, we cannot build low income housing to subsidize growth in other parts of the region. When people work in Walnut Creek in retail, they cannot afford to live there, so they will come to Oakland. In SF, the same thing; the rest of Alameda County is also subsidized by Oakland, and it is unfair. I believe that mixed income housing is the best option; we do not see tangible returns that



low-income housing allows for people to have long term mobility and breaking the cycle. The homeless dilemma cannot be solved by Oakland alone. We have a climate issue which makes Oakland an optimum location; no one wants to be unhoused in Detroit in the winter. If we placed 3k people in housing tomorrow, we would likely have 3k more within 90 days without a comprehensive plan. It is larger than what could be articulated here, but it does involve the coordination with several agencies to provide resources.

11. Please discuss your perspective on the following topics:
 - a. The respective roles of affordable (below-market-rate) housing and market-rate housing. Affordable housing should be leveraged to support those members of the community who are our responders first; teachers, service workers, displaced youth. We will need a comprehensive conversation to discuss what is considered affordable, however. We have many people who are unable to pay for housing at any price being offered as examples, which is unfair to the process.
 - b. The City's Housing Element and proposed zoning reforms—at this time we should not attempt to change existing neighborhoods with housing density; District 2 is an example of a densely built out community in our oldest neighborhoods in the east. What we should be doing is to build along the areas that have been underdeveloped—such as the waterfront—so that we do not displace community, and we offer vibrancy to underutilized areas, and we can use the National Harbor, Washington DC waterfront, or Long Beach as examples.
 - c. Oakland's Encampment Management Policy, implementation of it to date, and improvements needed moving forward. Right now, it appears that we are finally following the Encampment policy; to a point. We still have a ways to go particularly in our district with the use of parks and streets for autos.
 - d. The City/County's approach to mental health and substance abuse treatment—this involves a County intervention. The County has supported Oakland far more than other cities, and we don't have any idea of resource allocation; there are times when funds have been distributed and Oakland does not report the funds to County.

Public infrastructure

*The following questions ask for your perspective on improving Oakland's **public infrastructure**.*

12. What specific and measurable improvements will you deliver with respect to Oakland's public infrastructure over the next two years? How do you plan to deliver these improvements?

At the minimum, we need to ensure that the street repairs are continued without interruption; we cannot play politics with our streets. We also need to ensure that critical safety issues are addressed immediately; i.e. street lights out at 2nd @Jackson, and I will



ask for quarterly report cards, where we are given data to factors such as the number of calls made to 311 to address the issue.

13. What are the biggest problem(s) Oakland faces when it comes to public infrastructure? How might we address these challenges, and what trade-offs, if any, might we need to consider?

Oakland is nearly 175 years old, and as one of the oldest cities in the region, our infrastructure will take decades of repairs to fix. Meanwhile, climate change has impacted our streets and hillsides, as we have uneven rainfalls and water tables undermine the systems, not to mention sewer systems which were designed to support 100 year old service. A natural trade off is a bond measure; a more practical trade off is evaluation of city services and which should be given greater priority.

14. Please discuss any specific improvements you expect to make during your term related to:

- a. Blight, litter and dumping—I plan to strengthen enforcement and work to increase fees for blight and illegal dumping. If we are to utilize non law enforcement to support Oakland, we should be able to leverage them in supporting enforcement and reporting.
- b. Road repair & repaving—I’ve addressed the emphasis that we must adhere to the schedule, and provide regular report card updates
- c. Bike/pedestrian safety and public transportation—I will work with transit agencies and pedestrian groups to create “The Web,” a system of continuous non motor vehicular roadways.
- d. Streetscape improvements (trees, parklets, etc)—we need to work with local agencies and nonprofit partnerships to improve our systems. For example, we have hundreds of youth in Oakland who would support community service hours as a part of their graduation requirements, scouting efforts, etc.
- e. Stormwater management—improving connectivity with our storm drainage master planning dept and Alameda County, the city of Piedmont, and community partners such as Save The Bay are paramount.

Fiscal issues & budget

*The following questions ask for your perspective on **addressing Oakland’s immediate fiscal crisis and long-term structural budget deficit.***

15. How do you plan to address Oakland’s immediate fiscal crisis AND long-term structural budget deficit? What specific and measurable improvements will you deliver over the next two years? Please discuss your specific perspective on:

a. How you might increase general fund revenues

I do not believe that we can tax our way out of this. There is some role that seeking back business taxes can play, but for the most part we should be looking at new streams of revenue. Once, we had a burgeoning filming relationship, but



we made too many financial demands on the industry they left (side note, one of the Matrix movies cut us out of the credits and thank you section as a result). A decade ago, our restaurant scene was growing, but we placed living wage AND medical insurance demands on small employers, and it caused even the Chair of the Restaurant Association to pack up and move his restaurant out of town. I am going to construct a team of people to work with the Economic Department, the Oakland Chambers, the Business Organizations, and the Visit Oakland department to create an action plan to come back to Oakland.

b. How you might reduce expenses (specifying any cuts you might make)

First, any long-term solution does involve bringing labor to the table. Further, as I have said before, we need to inspect our grantees and contracts administered to non-profits and review internal non-essential services for cost savings. We need not pay for ineffective programs. We should freeze city administration increases and look for cost savings. We must make wages and benefit increases match inflation or the growth of surrounding cities (to stay competitive). We also need consistent internal reporting; it has been nearly a 18 months since departments have reported on their staffing levels, and this is a place to make reductions without the loss of labor.

How you might better manage unfunded liabilities, including pensions and deferred maintenance

We must work to refinance the CalPERS pension debt, with the understanding the bankruptcy hangs in the balance. We must manage resources across plans whenever possible. We can use the Pension Tax Bond pension surplus in 2026 to pay down our obligations, such the CalPERS pension debt. I have concerns about renewing the Pension Override Tax, and while I am uncertain about this step, it could free up to \$100 million.

16. What are the largest contributors to Oakland's budget challenges? In your opinion, why have previous Councils/Mayoral administrations failed to address these challenges?

The reason for not addressing these issues is simple: leaders have avoided telling the truth, that there has not been enough money to pay for the services and the personnel we want in the long term. I remember Ignacio De La Fuente telling people in a City Council meeting 20 years ago that our problem was that "we have too many poor people," and he was met with a barrage of boos from the audience. Now Oakland is not the only city facing this, but being the largest city in the state with the least amount of retail amplifies our problem here. We have had an inability to effectively manage the revenues we receive; the reasons why have varied over the years, but most recently we have been playing catchup with our obligations, and when new revenues come in, they are often misdirected, i.e. cannabis diversions to general budget. No one wanted to address this; the unfunded mandates, the retirement obligations, the infrastructure, the commitment to social programs; in the last 3 election cycles, the Councils were ill equipped to address it. There are some periods when the Council was ideologically



inflexible in making financial modifications, even independent of worker's salaries, to address this situation. With their delays, the financial obligations increased. Law enforcement is an easy target, yet we have a real problem and a perceived problem in living and doing business in Oakland. The real problem is that we experience far more violence than our neighboring cities, and the first function of any parent, any leader in society, is to keep the unit safe. The perceived problem is that while Oakland may not be more unsafe than say, Washington DC or New Orleans, the challenge of living near to the largest safest cities in the country—Fremont and San Jose—make us look even more violent. Unsafe cities have a difficult time bringing in revenue.

17. How will you maintain objectivity on fiscal matters in the face of pressure and specific budget asks by groups and organizations that endorse you?

I have chosen not to seek endorsements from groups which financially benefit from future negotiations. In most cases, it is a conflict of interest to gain support from those who you'll end up deciding a grant or a pay raise, and people who have no history in Oakland, no prior name recognition chomp at the bit to make these deals. One endorsement I decided not to participate asked me to sign a pledge that I would confer with them before making any policy decision, and to agree to give them unfettered access at any time. Some opponents have shown that they are incapable of separating themselves from those endorsements. In this time with ongoing investigations, budget crisis and a lack of transparency in contracting and grants, it is imperative that leadership show that it cares about the 90% of us as much as it has shown favoritism to the 10%, and not get caught up in situations one will have to explain later. Can I be objective? Yes, because it has been my job as a fiduciary for the nonprofits to the financial planning clients I've had to be just that; I plan to show objectivity with respect to each organization I am called upon to review.

18. Oakland businesses are an important contributor to the local and regional economy, and — directly and indirectly — to the city's financial resources. What are the major challenges faced by Oakland businesses? What specific steps will you take to ensure that Oakland businesses can thrive and are able to create more jobs and improve the Oakland economy?

Governance

*The following questions ask for your perspective on **improving governance** in Oakland.*

19. To what extent is the City of Oakland meeting or not meeting your definition of good government? As a councilmember, how would you contribute to improving government effectiveness, efficiency, and transparency in Oakland?

There are significant quality of life issues directly impacted by Oakland's governance. There are implied standards based on the expectations of what cities offer; we should have arts and entertainment commensurate with a city our size; our crime, our retail offerings should certainly be in line with mid-sized cities. We don't have any leaders



currently speaking to these quite common metrics which make a city vibrant. The role of a City Councilmember or Mayor is as much cheerleading as it is legislating. What makes for a good government is a responsive government, and a transparent government. Oakland does not meet these basic requisites by not offering transparency, i.e. all cities within the County have gone back to pre-pandemic working arrangements with the exception of Oakland. There are frequent complaints about the lack of follow through from leaders and returning messages. I plan to hold office hours a minimum of twice a month, attend monthly town halls, and create a kitchen cabinet advisory team, all with the purpose of staying close to community and understanding issues as they arise. What will ultimately help governance is hearing from the workers themselves—how they feel about their conditions, what they would like change to look like, and to review these findings with the reviewed conditions of the workplace through internal review.

20. More specifically, how might the city provide greater oversight and public accountability in contracting, grant-making, and outcomes/performance management?

There should be an agreed to standard evaluation for all contracting, grants, and performance reviews. The evaluations should be annual, and grant determination and program continuation should be a factor in the results. Many nonprofit organizations depend on the city to be a main provider to their bottom line, whereas its common for organizations which accept outside grant applications require that their awarded amounts be less than a certain percentage of the nonprofit's budget; i.e. budget awards cannot be more than 10% of the nonprofit budget.

21. Oakland has a unique hybrid governance structure where power is shared between the mayor, council, and city administrator. How would you work effectively within this structure as a councilmember?

What is required is to work directly with council first. So many people promise to make a ton of changes, not knowing that it begins with 5 votes. The hybrid structure offered during the Jerry Brown Administration changed the role of the Mayor more than the Council. We need to get collaborative again. At the same time, Council does not have the power to implement staffing direction, as does the City Administrator, yet I haven't see any tangible circumstances where the Council has presented new engagement options, and I will. Ultimately, this nearly 20 year old system has to be modified; we are not a Council Manager government nor are we a Strong Mayor system; rather we are the worst of both worlds right now, and the power wielded has largely depended on the Mayor in office, and his/her credibility with the Council. We need to change this.