



# 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](http://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](mailto: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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**Candidate name:** Kanitha Matoury

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**Phone number:** [\(510\) 708-3120](tel:(510)708-3120)

**Campaign website:** [KanithaForOakland.com](http://KanithaForOakland.com)

**Social media handles:**

- X: [@Kanitha4Oakland](https://twitter.com/Kanitha4Oakland)
- Facebook: [/KanithaForOakland](https://www.facebook.com/KanithaForOakland)
- Instagram: [@KanithaForOakland](https://www.instagram.com/KanithaForOakland)
- LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/kanitha-matoury-2b9a53ba/>

**Expected total fundraising amount:** \$100,000

**Funds raised to date:** \$0 Waiting for FPPC

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## 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 going to break this up in section:



I am a Cambodian immigrant, a U.S. Air Force veteran with nine years of service, and a business owner in Oakland for nearly 20 years. Many know my Spice Monkey Restaurant (before it was forced to close during COVID) as more than just a place to eat—it was a true community hub, where artists performed and people from all walks of life came together. I also own Howden Market, which remains open today, as well as commercial spaces in the Laurel and Chinatown neighborhoods.

Through these experiences, I've seen firsthand the challenges Oakland businesses face—from relentless theft, burglaries, and vandalism to the frustrating red tape when trying to get help from the city or the police. On top of that, rising costs—skyrocketing inflation, bank interest rates, and ever-increasing fees and taxes—have made it nearly impossible for small businesses to survive. These weren't just obstacles; they were hard lessons in perseverance and resilience. More importantly, they gave me a deep understanding of the systemic failures that hold our city back. That's why I'm committed to shaping practical, effective policies that support entrepreneurs, strengthen public safety, and rebuild trust in local government.

#### **Local Government & Community Involvement:**

I stay involved in many different groups—private, government, and community—doing what I can to contribute, whether it's time, resources, or just showing up. I've spoken at community safety forums and City Council meetings to push for small-business protections, better permitting, and stronger public safety. I've also worked with small builders on public-private partnerships to explore affordable housing solutions and cut through the red tape. For me, it's all about finding real solutions and getting things done.

#### **Issue-Specific Experience:**

Small and large businesses alike need real support—whether it's cutting through red tape, creating better reimbursement opportunities for both businesses and the locals who shop and support them, or improving access to creative funding with wraparound support to help startups survive their critical early years. But a thriving business community also depends on safe streets, stable housing, and functional infrastructure. That's why I've advocated for a balanced approach to housing—ensuring both market-rate and deeply affordable units, so workers and small business employees can live where they work. I've participated in block watch initiatives and supported community policing strategies that combine police presence with social services. As a business owner, I've dealt with city regulations firsthand and pushed for better street maintenance to keep commercial corridors safe and welcoming.

With 20 years of experience running a variety of businesses, I know what it takes to adapt, problem-solve, and keep going, even in the toughest times. Oakland is facing real challenges, but I believe my passion, experience, and commitment to practical solutions can help move us forward. Through these engagements, I've seen how strategic partnerships and common-sense



solutions can bring real improvements to Oakland when we work together. Whether it's through City Council meetings, nonprofit partnerships, or private-public collaborations, my focus is always on real solutions that make life better for Oakland's businesses and communities alike.

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

### **Challenges:**

**Public Safety & Crime:** From Highland Terrace to San Antonio, our neighborhoods are struggling with rising robberies, gun violence, prostitution, and dangerous sideshows. Restoring safety must be a top priority, with stronger enforcement and community-based solutions.

**Clean Streets & Parks:** Blight and trash are piling up, while boarded-up storefronts and neglected parks make our city feel abandoned. Small businesses are suffering—not just from repeated property crimes but also from the lack of a clean, safe environment for workers and customers. We need to clean up our streets and restore pride in our public spaces.

**Housing & Homelessness:** Encampments are growing, rents are skyrocketing, and too many families are being pushed out of Oakland. We need immediate, proactive solutions to keep people housed and ensure affordability for those who live and work here.

### **Bright Spots:**

- **Resilient Local Businesses:** Despite burglaries and a tough economy, Oakland's small business community continues to innovate and foster a sense of neighborhood pride.
- **Community Organizing & Cultural Diversity:** Oakland's mosaic of cultures, nonprofits, and local initiatives (e.g., youth-led cleanup drives, cultural festivals) showcases our ability to unite for shared goals and celebrate our city's unique identity.

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

I'm running to bring transparency, accountability, and practical/ common-sense solutions to Oakland City Hall. As a small-business owner and military veteran, I have the hands-on experience needed to tackle bureaucratic hurdles and budget challenges. I'm uniquely qualified because:

- **Real-World Problem Solving:** I've faced repeated burglaries, dealt with city permitting delays, and balanced payroll in tough economic times and more.
- **Collaborative Leadership:** My experience in the Air Force Reserve and as an entrepreneur has taught me the power of teamwork and leading diverse groups. I've built long-term relationships with colleagues and staff that have lasted for years—some of my team members have been with me for over a decade. Despite working in industries with tight margins and often lower pay, our retention rate speaks volumes about the strong,



supportive work culture I've fostered across all my businesses. It's all about creating an environment where people feel valued, motivated, and part of something bigger than just a job.

- **Vision:** As an immigrant, I've experienced firsthand the critical need for education and equitable access to resources, from housing to business loans. My creativity, adaptability, and resourcefulness have been at the heart of my success. I've always found ways to make the most of what I have—whether it's cooking a chicken in countless ways without waste or adapting and innovating through the challenges of owning a restaurant for 14 years. These qualities, along with hard work and a commitment to learning, have shaped who I am today and continue to drive my vision for a more inclusive and prosperous Oakland.

**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?**

- **Immediate Onboarding:** I'm meeting regularly with current and former councilmembers, department heads, and community stakeholders to understand both the legislative backlog and the most pressing neighborhood issues.
- **Prioritized Agenda:** My focus is strategic and results-driven: enhancing public safety, revitalizing the economy by supporting businesses of all sizes, addressing homelessness and housing affordability, and ensuring clean, safe streets. Through the "Love Where You Live" initiative, I aim to foster community engagement and drive active participation. These priorities are backed by thorough research, and I've already developed draft ordinances and budget amendments. However, before moving forward, I will ensure a clear understanding of the specific challenges and opportunities we face, so we can implement the most effective, sustainable solutions.
- **Rapid Community Engagement:** I plan to hold monthly "District 2 Roundtables" with local groups so we can move swiftly from problem identification to actionable solutions. I believe in hitting the ground running to ensure no time is wasted.

**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?**

**Measurable Goals:**



- **Prioritized Agenda:** My approach is practical and results-driven. For public safety, I advocate for increasing police staffing to ensure more sworn officers, aiming for a 50% increase in on-duty officers per shift within two years. This will reduce response times in underserved neighborhoods by at least 20% and decrease violent crime—such as armed robberies and gun violence—by 10% annually, tracked through OPD stats and local data. To support officers, I believe in strengthening the retention program and implementing buddy systems, where officers with complementary skill sets can enhance each other’s strengths, making the job safer and more enjoyable. Paired with lifeline support programs that promote mental health and well-being, these initiatives will help officers serve with focus and effectiveness. Additionally, I’ll advocate for using technology to streamline processes, allowing officers to focus on what they do best. Once I fully understand the current systems, I’ll be in a better position to propose improvements that make the operation more efficient, effective, and supportive for both officers and the communities they serve.
- **Revitalizing Oakland:** My focus is on measurable progress: supporting businesses of all sizes by cutting red tape, improving funding access, and creating better reimbursement opportunities for both businesses and local shoppers. I’ll work to ensure safe streets, stable housing, and functional infrastructure. I advocate for a balanced approach to housing, with both market-rate and deeply affordable units, to keep workers and small business employees in Oakland. My goal is to boost business growth and improve the quality of life for all residents.
- Through the "**Love Where You Live**" initiative, I aim to foster community engagement and drive active participation.

#### **Investment Shifts:**

- Increase funding for targeted community policing (foot patrols, neighborhood liaison officers) and advanced technology, investigative tools for violent crime.
- I support maintaining and expanding non-sworn programs like MACRO to handle mental health and low-level calls, freeing up sworn officers for higher-priority issues. To offset costs, I propose creating transition job opportunities for individuals in recovery, using their lived experience to assist in managing mental health and drug-related situations. These peer workers would collaborate with mental health professionals to improve outcomes. Additionally, I’ll advocate for using technology to streamline processes and optimize administration, redirecting resources into proactive accountability measures.

#### **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?**



### **Successful Programs:**

- MACRO (Mobile Assistance Community Responders of Oakland) has shown early promise in managing behavioral and mental health crises, reducing unnecessary police involvement. However, I plan to conduct further research to fully understand the program's successes and challenges, as it is still in its early stages.
- I would also like to learn more about this program, as it is crucial to me in shaping a comprehensive approach to safety and crime. Similarly, violence interruption initiatives like Ceasefire, which focus on conflict mediation and youth outreach, have shown promise in reducing retaliatory violence, and I am committed to exploring these solutions further.

### **Potential Discontinuations or Reforms:**

- Programs that overlap with existing services or lack measurable outcomes should be re-evaluated or discontinued. We need to consolidate duplicative efforts and implement strong data collection to assess true effectiveness and efficiency.

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

Based on Oakland's size, crime trends, and response time goals, 1,000 sworn officers is a reasonable benchmark—historically cited by multiple studies as a baseline for effective policing in a city our size. That number must be paired with:

- **Retention Measures:** Competitive pay, professional development, and accountability structures that promote trust and reduce turnover.
- **Balanced Approach:** A robust system of non-sworn and community-based programs to handle non-violent calls, so we optimize sworn officers' time for serious crime.

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

- **Gun Violence:** Expand Ceasefire, focusing on interagency task forces (OPD, FBI, ATF) to disrupt illegal gun supply lines and offering robust reentry programs for formerly incarcerated individuals.
- **Retail Robbery & Residential Burglary:** Strengthen neighborhood watch networks, improve lighting and security tech for commercial corridors, and deploy responsive investigative teams to deter repeat offenders.
- **Sex Trafficking:** Collaborate with nonprofits providing victim support, job training, and safe housing, while coordinating with law enforcement to dismantle trafficking rings. Impose heavy fines and penalties on "johns" to discourage the behavior.
- **Traffic Violence:** Implement "Safe Streets" initiatives—traffic calming measures, license plate readers, and enhanced driver accountability through stricter traffic enforcement.



Additionally, I propose creating a volunteer-driven, community-wide support network for individuals in recovery and transition. This group would offer a broad range of support for those seeking recovery and help them integrate into their communities.

**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?**

**Public Safety Task Force:** Establish a liaison to connect with District 2-specific groups, bringing/meet together representatives from OPD, the City Administrator's office, local nonprofits, and neighborhood councils. This team will fast-track feedback, identify specific needs, and collaborate on policy revisions to address those needs effectively.

**Regular Performance Check-Ins:** Monthly reporting on violent crime, response times, and major incidents, used to guide immediate operational tweaks.

**Public Forums:** Hold quarterly town halls to maintain transparency and allow residents to voice concerns or propose improvements and where they want us to focus on and how they want to see change.

**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?**

**Goals & Measures:**

- **Add 2,000 Affordable Units:** Through streamlined permitting, developer incentives, and public-private partnerships.
- **Expand Homeownership Pathways** with new down-payment assistance programs and low-interest loans, targeting at least 500 first-time buyers.

**Resource Shifts:**

- **Advocate for increased funding** for "Housing First" models, reduce developer fees for affordable housing projects, prioritize, and streamline planning, zoning, and building department processes to accelerate affordable housing development.



- **Aim to reduce encampments in District 2** by 50%, while minimizing the impact on residents, by pairing each cleanup with comprehensive transition services, including mental health support, shelter options, and job training. Drawing inspiration from successful strategies in other cities, we will also explore converting vacant city or county-owned buildings into functional facilities, offering long-term solutions and support for those in need.
- **Reduce:** Uncoordinated or duplicative administrative overhead in homelessness programs; shift those funds to direct services that produce permanent housing outcomes.

**11. Please discuss your perspective on the following topics:**

- a. The respective roles of affordable (below-market-rate) housing and market-rate housing**
- b. The City's Housing Element and proposed zoning reforms**
- c. Oakland's Encampment Management Policy, implementation of it to date, and improvements needed moving forward**
- d. The City/County's approach to mental health and substance abuse treatment**

**(a) Roles of Affordable vs. Market-Rate Housing**

A balanced approach is vital: market-rate housing to keep pace with demand and prevent upward pressure on middle-income rents, and deeply affordable units to protect low-income residents from displacement.

**(b) The City's Housing Element & Proposed Zoning Reforms**

I support upzoning in key transit corridors and incentivizing mixed-income developments, while safeguarding existing neighborhoods from rampant speculation. The Housing Element must prioritize equitable distribution of new units citywide. Yes in my back yard, when it makes common-sense. No land hogging.

**(c) Oakland's Encampment Management Policy & Implementation**

It needs stronger integration of social wrap around services. Each cleanup should connect unhoused residents to mental health, job training/placement, or transitional housing opportunities. We also need consistent timelines and follow-up to ensure people don't just relocate elsewhere or leave to fall back into the same situation.

**(d) City/County's Approach to Mental Health & Substance Abuse**

We must expand on-site mental health support at shelters, partner with Alameda County for additional bed space, and ensure better oversight of contracted providers. A city-county task force can track outcomes and improve accountability and transparency.

**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?**

**Objectives:**

Repave at least 200 miles of local roads, prioritizing historically neglected neighborhoods.  
Decrease illegal dumping in District 2 by 40% through better street monitoring, bulky item pickup expansions, and strict enforcement on fines for repeat dumpers.  
Install 50 new pedestrian safety projects (camera, traffic-calming, crosswalk improvements).

**Implementation:**

- **Bond Funding & State/Federal Grants:** Aggressively pursue infrastructure grants, plus consider bond measures for major overhauls.
- **Public-Private Partnerships:** Collaborate with local developers and nonprofits to adopt medians, plant trees, and maintain public spaces.

**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?**

**Problems:** Chronic underfunding, aging infrastructure, and a lack of coordinated planning across city departments, need more open competitive bids for more favorable rates.

**Trade-Offs:** To manage limited funds effectively, some capital improvement projects may need to be reprioritized. For instance, we may need to scale back high-cost beautification projects in favor of essential road repairs and improved stormwater drainage systems to prevent flooding and reduce long-term infrastructure damage.

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

- Blight, litter and dumping**
- Road repair & repaving**
- Bike/pedestrian safety and public transportation**
- Streetscape improvements (trees, parklets, etc)**
- Stormwater management**

**Blight, Litter, Dumping:** Strengthen city enforcement, expand free or low-cost bulky item pickups, and promote public "adopt-a-block" programs, inform residents of the different programs from WM has to offer.



**Road Repair & Repaving:** Implement a transparent, data-driven paving schedule focusing on equity for neglected areas and open to more competitive bids for more favorable rates

**Bike/Ped Safety & Public Transportation:** Support Vision Zero goals, add protected bike lanes and safer intersections, and coordinate with AC Transit to improve bus efficiency.

**Streetscape Enhancements:** Encourage tree planting, parklets, and local art installations to promote community pride.

**Stormwater Management:** Invest in green infrastructure (rain gardens, permeable pavements) to reduce flood risk and improve water quality.

#### **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**
- b. **How you might reduce expenses (specifying any cuts you might make)**
- c. **How you might better manage unfunded liabilities, including pensions and deferred maintenance**

#### **Immediate Strategy Advocate for:**

- Renegotiate the City's Debt Interest to free up millions in interest payments for essential services.
- Conduct an independent audit and establish a controller position, potentially filled by a civilian volunteer, to serve on a commission for each department. The goal would be to identify duplicative or inefficient spending.

#### **Long-Term Strategy:**

- **Increase Revenues:** Implement targeted revenue measures to boost tourism and encourage property owners to develop on their vacant lots. At the same time, offer incentives to attract a wide range of businesses to invest in Oakland. By fostering new businesses and supporting existing ones, we can expand the tax base, generate more job opportunities, and drive sustainable economic growth.
- **Reduce Expenses:** Scrutinize city contracts for cost overruns; ensure competitive bidding and transparent procurement processes.



- **Manage Unfunded Liabilities:** Work closely with unions and pension boards to stabilize/renegeotiate pension obligations, potentially through restructuring or longer amortization periods—while honoring commitments to current workers.

**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?**

**Largest Contributors:**

- **Pension and Retirement Liabilities:** Addressing the growing burden of pension obligations and evaluating potential adjustments to the benefits structure.
- **Rising Debt Service:** Managing escalating debt service costs, including high interest payments, which strain the city's budget.
- **Infrastructure Backlogs:** Addressing deferred maintenance and infrastructure repairs, which leads to more expensive law suite against the city and delayed fixes down the line.
- **Slow Response to Failed Contracts:** failing to act more swiftly to address contracts, particularly those with leaking costs or poor terms, to prevent long-term financial strain.

To tackle these challenges, the City of Oakland leader must take a more proactive approach in managing these liabilities and inefficiencies to ensure long-term fiscal health.

**Why Past Efforts Fell Short:**

- There was a consistent lack of long-term planning and the political will to address the tough structural reforms necessary for Oakland’s success.
- Short-term budgeting practices, often postponing essential maintenance and pension obligations, have exacerbated the city’s financial strain.
- Leadership shifts have failed to bring new vision or the urgency needed to address growing problems. Too often, politics took precedence over people, with leaders more focused on political games than the real needs of Oakland’s residents.
- The lack of a unified voice prioritizing the community’s well-being has caused us to lose sight of what truly matters: the prosperity and safety of the people we serve.

**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 commit to a data-driven approach, evaluating each budget request against measurable community outcomes. While I value input from endorsing groups, I believe in full transparency about any potential conflicts and will collaborate to find compromises that align with Oakland’s broader fiscal health.



**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?**

**Major Challenges:** Retail crime, high commercial rents, burdensome regulations, and uncertainty around city permitting.

**Specific Steps:**

- **Small Business Rescue Initiative:** Tax incentives, streamlined licensing, and micro-grants for entrepreneurs recovering from pandemic or property damage.
- **Corridor Safety & Beautification:** Enhanced security measures, more frequent street/sidewalk cleaning, and facade improvement grants.
- **Transparent Permit Process:** Standardize timelines, reduce redundancy, and hold city staff accountable for delays.
- City staff should take pride in their work, actively engaging with the community and embracing their role as public servants dedicated to the people. I will advocate for improving city staff morale by fostering a supportive work environment, ensuring they have the resources they need, and recognizing their contributions to better serve Oakland.

**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?**

Oakland has strong grassroots engagement but often stumbles on transparency and efficiency.

**We need:**

- **Open Data Platforms:** Real-time tracking of budgets, contract spending, and departmental performance.
- **Clear Accountability Structures:** Each department should have public metrics and timelines for major projects.
- **Proactive Constituent Outreach:** District-based offices that respond quickly to resident concerns, combined with e-portals for reporting issues.

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



**Independent Oversight Board:** Empower an external review body or expand the City Auditor’s and controller role, ensuring we regularly audit large contracts for cost-effectiveness.

**Performance-Based Contracting:** Tie contract renewals or expansions to measurable outcomes—e.g., job placements, reduced service response times.

**Transparent Bidding & RFPs:** Require that significant city contracts undergo a well-publicized RFP process with a published scoring rubric.

**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?**

**Collaborative Policy-Making:** Hold regular joint briefings with the Mayor, City Administrator, and fellow councilmembers to align on priorities.

**Respect the Balance of Powers:** The Council sets policy and approves budgets, while the City Administrator manages daily operations. Good governance requires open communication, shared accountability, and transparency. I believe in following what I call the “3C Rule”: First, **Commitment**—defining what we are truly dedicated to. Second, **Concentration**—focusing our efforts fully. And most importantly, **Consistency**—the glue that holds everything together and drives lasting change.

**Community Input:** Ensure community voices are factored into major decisions early, preventing last-minute conflicts or vetoes.