



Empower Oakland Candidate Questionnaire

Oakland mayoral 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 our candidate 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).

Candidate name: Elizabeth Swaney

Email: eswaney@gmail.com

Phone number: 510-757-7184

Campaign website: www.standupoakland.com

Social media handles:

- X: www.x.com/elizabethswaney
- Facebook: www.facebook.com/elizabethswaney
- Instagram: www.instagram.com/lizswaney
- LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/elizabethswaney

Expected total fundraising amount: TBD

Funds raised to date: \$200

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 grew up in Oakland in a bilingual English-Spanish household and began my education at Oakland Public Schools. I later earned a Bachelor of Arts with a triple major from UC Berkeley in Political Economy of Industrial Societies, Political Science, and German, receiving honors in Political Science, as well as a minor in the History of the Built Environment. While at Berkeley, I was also part of the Cal Rowing team as a coxswain; I



steered the boat and directed the rowers as a coxswain. I was also a rower and coxswain in high school for Oakland Strokes. Being part of a sports program at an early age showed me how important teamwork is, which I continue to carry with me.

While at UC Berkeley, I volunteered for Gavin Newsom's campaign for San Francisco Mayor, where I assisted with Spanish-speaking voter outreach. I later interned at his first Mayor's Office of Neighborhood Services (MONS). At MONS, I assisted with homeless outreach, neighborhood outreach and communication, and the first same-sex marriages in the city.

After Berkeley, I earned a Master's Degree from Harvard University in Real Estate and Project Management, where I studied urban planning and public infrastructure extensively. While at Harvard, I was also a Graduate Assistant Coach for their Track and Field Team.

I have spent most of my life in Oakland but spent some years away in Utah while training for the Olympics. I first competed for USA Bobsled and Skeleton after I was recruited for them as a skeleton athlete. Skeleton is headfirst down a bobsled track at speeds of up to 80mph. I then learned to ski in Utah and competed in the 2018 Winter Olympics in Korea in freestyle ski halfpipe.

Sports and teamwork often work as an important metaphor for many of life's lessons.

Through my experiences—whether in athletics, public service, or community organizing, I've learned the value of resilience, strategy, and bringing people together to achieve a shared goal. Oakland is a city full of talent, heart, and potential, and I am committed to working alongside our community to create a future where every resident can thrive. Just like in sports, success comes from strong leadership, collaboration, and the determination to push forward no matter the obstacles. I'm ready to put in the work for Oakland, to listen, to lead, and to build a city that truly works for everyone.

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

Public safety and homelessness are often top-of-mind for Oakland residents, and the city's options towards these are often tied closely to Oakland's budget, which is currently at a deficit. Oakland's people are the bright spots of the city, along with our resilience, creativity, diversity, and strength.

3. Why are you running for office, and why are you uniquely qualified to serve in this position?

Where others see problems in Oakland, I see potential. As an Oakland native, Olympian, stand-up comedian, UC Berkeley and Harvard alum, former technical recruiter, stuntwoman, and barista, I have developed a diverse skill set and a deep understanding of our community's unique challenges and strengths. My journey began in Oakland public schools,



and as an adult, I worked multiple jobs simultaneously to pursue my aspirations. This determination and persistence are qualities I will bring to City Hall.

My experiences have equipped me with the resilience and adaptability to navigate complex issues. As an Olympian, I honed discipline and teamwork; as a stand-up comedian, I have learned the importance of communication and connecting with diverse audiences; my academic pursuits at UC Berkeley and Harvard have provided me with critical thinking and policy analysis skills.

I offer a fresh perspective to politics and am excited to present big and new ideas to the city that I believe will help strengthen 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?

As an Oakland native with a diverse background, including experiences as an Olympian, stand-up comedian, and alumna of UC Berkeley and Harvard, I have consistently demonstrated determination and resourcefulness in achieving my goals. In preparation for the immediate responsibilities of this special election term, I am actively engaging with community leaders and residents to understand their pressing concerns. I am also collaborating with current city officials and attending city meetings that will help strategize how I can best use this focused time on key initiatives.

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?

Firstly, I plan on meeting with the police union to understand their needs and how they see the city. Improving public safety can be more easily achieved if the police union and the city government are aligned.

Having been through the police recruitment process twice over the past two years, ranking #1 in after the panel interview and agility test each time, but not hired, I believe the process is difficult, outdated, and expensive for candidates and may turn away potential officers who want to help the city. I propose incorporating technology improvements into the recruitment process, as well as giving current sworn officers better access to technology that can help them with their day-to-day jobs.

Here are other ideas:



The creation of an interactive public safety dashboard that tracks key metrics in real-time, such as response times, crime rates, and effectiveness of alternative responses.

Run different crime prevention strategies and interventions for 90 days, then evaluate and pivot based on results.

Hire more 911 dispatchers.

Expansion of Alternative Crisis Response: Increase investment in street teams to help the community and non-police crisis response teams.

Increase funding for community-based violence intervention and youth diversion programs

Determine if more specialized roles are needed in the police department, such as more detectives

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?

As an Oakland native and long-time resident, I see the importance of non-sworn responses to public safety. Programs like Mobile Assistance Community Responders of Oakland (MACRO), which send trained civilian responders to non-violent issues in the community, have helped Oakland. However, it's necessary to continually assess these initiatives to ensure they effectively serve our residents. I am committed to evaluating all public safety programs and making data-driven decisions to enhance their effectiveness for our community. The expansion of this group, or others, might be a possibility as well. Here are additional ideas:

Uber for Emergency Response:

The creation of a fully tech-enabled dispatch system, where social workers and mental health responders self-select calls they can take in real-time, just like ride-sharing drivers.

Community Patrol:

Recruit senior and other community volunteers (retired teachers, pastors, etc.) as neighborhood liaisons. Many crimes stem from youth feeling disconnected. We could also deploy trusted community figures instead of cops when appropriate.

For every new officer, also fund a non-police public safety role.

Create a new class of Oakland Community Guardians—unarmed public safety workers trained in de-escalation, community mediation, and nonviolent intervention.

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



Oakland currently has around 700 sworn police officers, according to multiple sources. The national average for police officers to residents is about 2.4 officers for 1,000 residents. With a population of nearly 450,000 residents, Oakland would need nearly 1,100 to be on track with the national average. Oakland needs to modernize its police recruitment process, which could help current officers gain more tech skills and keep new candidates interested rather than having them wait for months.

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

I plan to establish specialized units and task forces for robbery, sex trafficking, bipping, residential burglary, and traffic violence. These could give sworn police officers new positions. Interested community members could apply and also be involved in the advising and monitoring process.

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

I first plan to meet with OPD, the City Administrator's office, the city council, the community, and other stakeholders to first determine their needs. That would help give me the context necessary to help bring these groups to alignment on key issues.

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 can tackle homelessness by fast-tracking modular housing, converting vacant offices, expanding safe parking villages, and empowering locals through community land trusts. Prioritizing direct rental aid over costly shelters and using AI-driven housing matches can rapidly move people into stable homes while preventing displacement. More mental health and general health services are also needed to help the homeless population.

11. Please discuss your perspective on the following topics:
 - a. The respective roles of affordable (below-market-rate) housing and market-rate housing



As an athlete, comedian, stand-up comedian, and barista, I know how crucial affordable housing is for keeping creatives and workers in Oakland. Market-rate housing helps supply, but without strong affordability policies, displacement worsens. A balanced approach is key.

b. The City's Housing Element and proposed zoning reforms

I support mixed-use, transit-friendly growth with more amenities while also ensuring the needs of longtime Oakland residents are met. Community input is crucial. Public safety also needs to be addressed and thought of in development plans. A form of the Broadway Valdez development plan could be revitalized. Other areas in the city could also be developed through public-private partnerships, which may also help decrease the city deficit.

c. Oakland's Encampment Management Policy, implementation of it to date, and improvements needed moving forward

More transitional housing, job training, and mental health support are needed to help the homeless population. Closing encampments can only work if these former encampment residents are willing to move to housing which supports their needs.

d. The City/County's approach to mental health and substance abuse treatment

As an athlete, I value mental resilience, but many lack access to care. Oakland must invest in long-term treatment and crisis response beyond law enforcement to better support those struggling with substance abuse and homelessness.

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?

I will prioritize fixing many aspects of Oakland's infrastructure, including roads, public lighting, improving public transit access, and upgrading parks, funded through creative revenue streams like selling city naming rights (e.g., "City Hall brought to you by X"). Additionally, I'd push for innovative economic development and public-private partnerships. For example, the Oakland Army Base could be transformed into an OpenAI research and innovation hub to partner on Project Stargate, which intends to invest \$500 billion into AI infrastructure in the United States over the next few years. These AI advancements could also help infuse Oakland's infrastructure. These efforts would bring jobs, boost infrastructure investment, and make Oakland a leader in tech and sustainability.



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?

Public infrastructure is not prioritized as is often an afterthought in Oakland. Public infrastructure also needs to be modernized, with the help of tech and AI.

14. Please discuss any specific improvements you expect to make during your 4-year term related to:

- a. Blight, litter and dumping

Offer residents incentives to bring waste to collection areas, especially in high litter and dumping areas.

- b. Road repair & repaving

Analyze which streets need repairs. Use data to determine where accidents or damage to vehicles occur, and prioritize fixing those streets. Also, monitor Nextdoor to see where residents are seeing roads in needs of repair.

- c. Bike/pedestrian safety and public transportation

Offer residents incentives for biking to work, and subsidies for purchasing bikes. Expand upon California's e-bike incentive program. Attend bike and pedestrian meetings to learn which streets can be made safer.

- d. Streetscape improvements (trees, parklets, etc)

Partner with community groups to upkeep parklets. Help ensure the health of trees in the city.

- e. Stormwater management

Along with focusing on creeks and watersheds, protect and strengthen the ecosystems within these environments. Also, promote sustainability throughout Oakland.

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



Sell naming rights to city properties and departments, resulting in possibly quick revenue. For example, City Hall, presented by In-N-Out, or the Oakland Fire Department, presented by Flamin' Hot Cheetos. Also, sell or create public-private partnerships to address next steps for older and underutilized city properties, like the Old Oakland Army Base land. OpenAI's Project Stargate is looking for a home, and a partnership with that organization may help revitalize Oakland's infrastructure.

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

Cuts may not be as necessary with the sale of naming rights and public-private partnerships with city-owned properties.

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

Look for state and federal grants for these, as well as looking at what Oakland already has as possible revenue streams.

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?

Too much reliance has been placed on the proposed Oakland Coliseum sale.

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 appreciate support from different groups, but when it comes to budgeting, I prioritize fairness, transparency, and smart financial decisions that benefit the entire community. I will listen to as many perspectives as possible, rely on data, and make objective choices to ensure resources are used effectively and sustainably

18. Given the mayor's role in proposing but not controlling the final budget, how would you build consensus around your fiscal priorities? How would you work with the City Administrator to ensure effective implementation?

I enjoy bringing people together by focusing on smart, practical solutions that serve the whole community. Building consensus means listening, being transparent, and making data-backed decisions. I will work closely with the City Administrator to keep things on track, ensure funds are used effectively, and adjust as needed to get the best results that benefit the community.

19. 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, create more jobs, and improve the Oakland economy?

I would make it easier to start and grow a business in Oakland. With smart policies and partnerships to support local entrepreneurs, improvements in public safety, and a streamlined process to maintain one's business in Oakland, these businesses would be more supported.

Oakland's businesses received some aid during the pandemic, and it would be helpful for Oakland businesses to continue to receive aid, whether it's through state and/or federal funding.

As a stand-up comedian and the creator of my Snark Tank/Money is Funny tech pitch roast comedy show, I know what it's like to run a small business here.

Governance

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

20. To what extent is the City of Oakland meeting or not meeting your definition of good government? As mayor, what changes would you make to improve government effectiveness, efficiency, and transparency in Oakland?

The City of Oakland government has passionate people and an extensive history. More needs to be done so Oakland residents more clearly see and understand what is happening in city government. When this happens, more residents will feel empowered to voice their opinions and express their needs, which will help guide Oakland on how the city can best serve its residents.

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

The city needs to hire a team of capable people focused on grant-making, public accountability, and more. While this hiring may be an up-front expense, a specialized team can save money and brainstorm ways to increase the city's revenue.

22. Oakland has a unique hybrid governance structure where power is shared between the mayor, council, and city administrator. How would you provide effective executive leadership within this structure? Please give specific examples of how you would:
- a. Set and drive citywide priorities by aligning the council, staff, and community around shared priorities

I would continually seek to understand what each district needs, spend time in each district, and get to know each city council member and other community leaders.



- b. Build productive working relationships with city council members.

Setting regular meetings with each city council member can help us towards alignment.

- c. Manage and empower the city administrator

Ensure constant communication with the city administrator and alignment.

- d. Ensure accountability across departments

Focus on teamwork, positivity, alignment, honesty, and transparency.

23. As Oakland's mayor, you would be the city's most visible leader but would need to work through others to implement many initiatives. How would you do the following (and please provide examples from your experience that demonstrate these capabilities):

- a. Use the platform of the mayor's office to advance city priorities?

As mayor, I would use my platform to rally people around big ideas and get things done. I believe in making complex issues clear and engaging so the community feels involved and energized. For example, in my work creating and hosting comedy shows like *Money is Funny/Snark Tank*, I brought together comedians, investors, and founders to break down complicated startup and finance topics in a way that was both fun and insightful. I would take the same approach as mayor: communicating in a way that connects with people and brings them into the conversation while pushing forward policies that make a real impact.

- b. Build and maintain coalitions to achieve your goals?

I know that for a goal to be achieved, like making it to the Olympics, one needs to bring people together and find common ground. I've done this across industries, from comedy to sports to business. When I organize pitch roast shows, I build relationships with founders, investors, and comedians, each with different perspectives, and encourage them to collaborate on something new. As mayor, I would take the same approach, whether it's working with businesses, community groups, or government agencies. Ideally this process would help align people with shared interests, find creative solutions, and keep the momentum going to achieve positive results for Oakland.

- c. Represent Oakland effectively in regional discussions?

I've represented teams, organizations, and even countries on big stages, from the Olympics to Hollywood. I know how to advocate for a cause, tell a compelling story, and make sure our voice is heard. Oakland needs a strong advocate in regional discussions, whether it's about funding, transportation, or economic development. I would bring the same energy, persistence, and strategic thinking I've used in my



career to make sure Oakland gets the attention and resources it deserves.