



## Empower Oakland 2024 Candidate Questionnaire

*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.*

*All 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 by early September.*

*Please email the completed questionnaire as a .docx or .pdf document to [info@empoweroakland.com](mailto:info@empoweroakland.com). Due by Friday, August 16th by 6PM.*

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**Candidate Name: Brenda Harbin-Forte**

**Email: [judgebrenda2019@comcast.net](mailto:judgebrenda2019@comcast.net)**

**Phone Number: 510-878-7753**

**Office & District Sought: Oakland City Attorney**

**Campaign Website: [www.harbin-forteforcycityattorney2024.org](http://www.harbin-forteforcycityattorney2024.org)**

**Social Media Handles**

- Twitter:
- Facebook:
- Instagram:
- LinkedIn:
- TikTok:

**Expected total Fundraising Amount: 150,000**

**Funds Raised To Date: \$12,000**

### General Questions

1. What is your background/experience in Oakland? I moved to Oakland 54 years ago when I was in high school, and attended and graduated from McClymond’s High in West Oakland. After graduating law school, I practiced law in Oakland with the firm Harris, Alexander & Burris. I was appointed to the Oakland Municipal Court in 1992, and later became an Alameda County Superior Court judge in 1998. I retired from the bench in 2019. I am the Vice President of the Bernard E. and Alba Witkin Charitable Foundation, have served on Oakland Police Commission, have served as President of Black Women Lawyers of Northern California, President of the Alameda County Bar Association, and the Mayor’s appointee to the Selection Panel for the Redistricting Commission,



2. What are the top two challenges facing Oakland today? What are the bright spots?  
The top two challenges are crime/public safety, and homelessness. The bright spots are the people of Oakland, who love our city and who want to see it become a better version of itself.
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 am running for Oakland City Attorney because I feel the City, its elected officials, and its boards and commissions have not been receiving high quality legal advice from the City Attorney's Office. This lack of quality legal advice has resulted in numerous law suits against the City, mismanagement of various boards and commissions, and chaos at the city level.
4. Prior to running for office, how were you involved in local government and/or your community? What were your biggest accomplishments? I was a municipal court and superior court judge for almost 28 years; I served on the selection panel for the Redistricting Commission, and served on the Police Commission.

## Oakland City Attorney

5. **Please describe your understanding of the role of the City Attorney in making Oakland the best possible city for Oakland residents and businesses. And based on that understanding:** The role of the City Attorney is to
  - a. What has the current City Attorney done well? The City Attorney has established some initiatives related to tenant's rights. Some of the initiatives related to
  - b. What has the current City Attorney not done as well? The current City Attorney has not managed litigation as well as it should have, and has not monitored the work being done by outside law firms. The City Attorney has also not been aggressive in having the Oakland Police Department exit the Negotiated Settlement Agreement.
6. **Do you support converting the role of City Attorney back to being an appointed vs elected position? Why or why not?** No I do not. Having the position be elected gives the City Attorney a certain level of independence that is needed to make the tough calls and not be beholden to other elected officials.
7. **What specific and measurable improvements will Oakland residents see as a result of your 4-year term as City Attorney?** As part of your response, please:
  - a. Summarize what "seemingly intractable" challenges Oakland will begin making progress on with the improved legal guidance you will bring as the new City Attorney. The biggest "seemingly intractable" challenge is that the City Attorney's office relies too much on outside counsel. Under my leadership, the City



Attorney's office will see a reduction in the use of outside counsel, and in-house City Attorneys handle those cases.

- b. Discuss your perspectives on:
    - i. The balance of cases assigned to in-house vs outside counsel. The use of outside counsel is has to be curtailed, so that in-house expertise can be developed.
    - ii. The amount of money the city has historically paid in legal judgements, and settlements. The City pays too much money in legal judgments and settlements because of a failure of some of the attorneys to thoroughly analyze the legal issues and provide sound legal advice.
    - iii. The adequate staffing levels for the City Attorney's office and how to maintain high staff engagement levels/morale. We must undertake a comprehensive evaluation of staffing levels and decide how we can use best practices to ensure attorneys receive a high level of job satisfaction while at the same time feel appreciated and challenged.
  - c. Describe the experience(s) from your past that should give Oaklanders confidence you can deliver on these goals? When I became Presiding Judge of our Juvenile Court in 2000, I knew that a different approach to how we could meet the needs of families and children was sorely needed. I brought all stakeholders to the table and received input from all of them. Eventually, we improved the juvenile justice system, and made it one where families and children felt they were getting the help they needed and children were returned home to a safe environment. We created an annual Adoption Day in 2000, my first year as Presiding Judge, and brought together a joyful event that all stakeholders could celebrate. We went on to deliver a juvenile just system that worked for the children and families, and returned many children home to the families of origin.
8. **What policy areas are you eager to address as City Attorney?** The policy areas I am eager to address relate to how Oakland can strike a fair balance between the rights of tenants and property owners, so that we can provide affordable housing but not put the burden on property owners to bear the full load of touch economic times.
9. **What is the City Attorney's role in addressing Oakland's immediate fiscal budget crisis AND long-term structural budget deficit. What specific actions will you take to create a more financially sound city?** As part of your response, please:
- a. Summarize the largest contributors to Oakland's budget challenges and your understanding of why previous Councils/Mayoral administrations have not solved the issue(s). The largest contributor to our budget challenges are that we just don't have the money to do everything that needs to be done to meet the needs of our residents. Often there seems to be a reluctance to cut pet projects of a



select few council members, and we just continue to engage in the poor decision making that leads us into the same problems.

- b. Describe the legal principles, counsel, and strategies that will reduce expenses, including specific program cuts, to free up resources that can be allocated toward addressing other budget priorities. Before looking at program cuts, I will have to undertake a comprehensive review of whether there is duplication of services, and evaluate which programs can be consolidated.
- c. Describe how you will increase revenues to fund much-needed services, avoid painful cuts, invest in the city's future growth, and address the structural deficit. Unfortunately, with our budget in the condition it is in, I cannot see a path forward to increase revenues.
- d. Discuss your perspectives on:
  - i. Major sources of general fund revenues, and any recent trends or changes. Identifying major sources of general fund revenues will take a "think tank" of stakeholders coming to the table to put our heads together to come up with creative solutions to our fiscal crises.
  - ii. Major general fund expenditures, and any recent trends or changes. Again, only a comprehensive review and analysis of our general fund expenditures with all stakeholders at the table will yield the best ideas of how we move forward.
  - iii. Unfunded liabilities, including pensions and deferred maintenance, and any recent trends or changes. Given the fiscal crisis Oakland is facing, everything needs to be on the table.
- e. Describe how you will maintain objectivity despite pressure and specific budget asks by the groups and organizations that have endorsed you. Maintaining objectivity in the face of perceived pressures from those who have endorsed me will be easy. Everyone will understand that my duty is to act in the interests of all Oaklanders, not just a select few.
- f. Describe the experience(s) from your past that should give Oaklanders confidence you can deliver on these goals? When I became Presiding Judge of our Juvenile Court in 2000, I knew that a different approach to how we could meet the needs of families and children was sorely needed. I brought all stakeholders to the table and received input from all of them. Eventually, we improved the juvenile justice system, and made it one where families and children felt they were getting the help they needed and children were returned home to a safe environment. We created an annual Adoption Day in 2000, my first year as Presiding Judge, and brought together a joyful event that all stakeholders could celebrate. We went on to deliver a juvenile just system that worked for the children and families, and returned many children home to the families of origin.



10. **Please describe what you plan to do differently from business-as-usual in city hall to ensure effective, efficient, transparent, and accountable governance in Oakland.** As part of your response, please:
- Describe in what ways the City of Oakland is meeting and/or not meeting your definition of good government. The City is not meeting my definition of good government because the City Attorney's office has a lax attitude toward ensuring the employees follow the City Charter and other governing laws and rules. The City Attorney's office too often turns a blind eye to misconduct and violations of the law. For example, even though Mayor Sheng Thao failed to file her papers on time to run for Mayor, the City Attorney's office let her be on the ballot. Those kinds of decisions send the message that complying with the law is optional.
  - Summarize what changes you would make in order to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of city governance and increase transparency. I will ensure that the message from the top is that no one is above the law. The City Attorney must be courageous enough to make the hard calls and prohibit people from profiting from their misconduct.
  - Answer how Oakland City Council can provide greater oversight and public accountability in contracting, grant-making, and outcomes/performance management. Oakland City Council can take the time to review and understand the legal issues it has to decide, to ensure that the legal analysis provided by the City Attorney is sound and not sloppy. Sometimes it appears that the City Council is just looking for an easy way out in the moment, and fails to consider the long-term effect and implications of its decisions.
11. **For incumbents:** What is a vote you're MOST and LEAST proud of in the last four years. Briefly describe the issue, why you voted the way you did, and what you think now about that vote. N/A
12. **For new candidates:** What was the most impactful Council vote in the past four years? Briefly describe the issue, what you think of the Council's decision, and what you would have done had you been on the Council. The most impactful Council vote was to reduce the number of police officers. Had I been on the Council, I would have voted against that, and would have worked with my colleagues to look for alternatives to "defunding the police."
13. **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?** The major challenges faced by Oakland businesses is the increase in crime. I will support an increase in police officer positions so the residents feel safer and businesses feel safer returning to Oakland.



**14. There are important ballot measures that are up for vote in November. How would you vote on the following and why?**

- a. Would you vote to Recall District Attorney Pamela Price? (YES/NO)  
UNDECIDED.
- b. Would you vote to Recall Oakland Mayor Sheng Thao? (YES/NO) YES.
- c. Would you vote to pass the Oakland Measure Z renewal? (YES/NO) NO.
- d. Would you vote to pass California Prop 36 (makes changes to Prop 47)?  
(YES/NO) YES>