



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 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. Due by Friday, August 16th by 6PM.

Candidate Name: Ryan Richardson
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Campaign Website: www.RyanForOakland.com

Social Media Handles

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

Expected total Fundraising Amount:

Funds Raised To Date:

General Questions

1. What is your background/experience in Oakland?

I’ve practiced law for over 22 years, and I’ve been serving Oakland for 11 years. I’ve had the opportunity to work in various practice areas in the City Attorney's Office, from public meetings, to public record, to public employment, to elections, to municipal finance. I now serve as Oakland’s Chief Assistant City Attorney. I love the City I serve, where I live and where I’m raising my family. I would sincerely be honored to serve as Oakland’s next City Attorney. I know from years of experience how complex this job is, and I know I’ll be ready on day one.



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

Oakland's recurring budget deficit is arguably our biggest challenge because it impacts and compounds every other problem we need to solve, from public safety, to housing, to homelessness.

I believe our second overarching challenge is making sure we don't give in to pessimism and negativity. There are only eleven elected offices in City Hall. We need all of our leaders to be positive and ready to collaborate, ready to put Oakland first, and ready to get to serve on day one.

I know that Oakland's future is bright, if we get to work. The Oaklanders I talk to are still here because they still love it here, despite all the challenges we're facing. Even with our challenges, no city is more diverse, more vibrant, more inclusive, more artistic, more engaged, or more energized.

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 the only candidate who has practiced municipal law for over a decade, from municipal finance, to elections, to public employment, to public records, to public meetings. I am the only candidate who has experience managing a modern, dynamic law office made up of over 80 civic-minded professionals. I've had the opportunity to work in various practice areas in the City Attorney's Office, and I now serve as Oakland's Chief Assistant City Attorney. I did not plan to run for office until last year. But I love my job. I love my co-workers and the work we do. I love working to help Oakland move forward. With everything this office and this city has given me, and how much I care about it, I feel a duty to try to keep the office on the right track and to give back.

4. Prior to running for office, how were you involved in local government and/or your community? What were your biggest accomplishments?

I have always taken pride in hard work, and I have always found joy in public service. These are just a few of the values I inherited from my parents and step-parents, three public school teachers and a public school principal.

If I was molded as a person by my family, then I was forged at Howard University, one of our country's most renowned Historically Black College-Universities (HBCUs). Attending with the help of scholarships, I witnessed how young people of color can and will thrive in a community that's serious about tearing down barriers to opportunity.



After graduating with honors from USC Gould School of Law, I began working at an international law firm. But it was not long before I left that job and began a journey of public service. I opened my own law firm dedicated to helping people start small businesses, and eventually found my calling protecting workers. My commitment to using the law to protect the people stretches back 20 years, to my early days suing Fortune 500 companies on behalf of employees who'd been discriminated against or otherwise treated unfairly.

More than a decade ago, I decided I wanted to serve the City of Oakland. I applied for several jobs before I was able to get my foot in the door as an analyst in the City's equal employment office. I began investigating employee complaints of discrimination and harassment and I proudly joined IFPTE Local 21.

I was eventually encouraged to apply for a position in the City Attorney's office to supervise the office's Labor and Employment unit. I was instrumental in implementing ballot Measure FF in 2014 (Oakland's local sick-leave and minimum wage law) and Measure Z in 2018 (our hotel-worker protection law), including working to draft and publish interpretive regulations and stand up Oakland's Department of Workplace and Employment Standards. I was also instrumental in both drafting and implementing Oakland's Emergency Paid Sick Leave ("EPSL") ordinance in 2020, to mitigate the devastating impacts of COVID-19 by ensuring that employers in Oakland provided time off to employees who needed to recover from illness or to care for their loved ones.

I've been fortunate to work my way up to Oakland's Chief Assistant City Attorney. I'm running for City Attorney because I care about the work, and I want to help Oakland move forward.

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:**
 - a. What has the current City Attorney done well?
 - b. What has the current City Attorney not done as well?

In addition to the core work of providing legal advice to City leaders, and advocating in court, the City Attorney's office should seek to help build bridges between leaders in City Hall and leaders in the community. Being accessible to the community can sometimes be a struggle for the City Attorney's Office, in part because we are legally required to maintain certain confidences. But, even with those limitations, we can do a better job of being communicative and accessible to the community, to stakeholders, and to the media, so that they have a way to



ask questions, provide input, and hopefully build even more trust in our office and in city government.

6. Do you support converting the role of City Attorney back to being an appointed vs elected position? Why or why not?

In most cities, the city attorney is appointed by the city council. That used to be the practice in Oakland, until our Charter was amended by an overwhelming vote in 1998. In 2011, voters had an opportunity to return to an appointed City Attorney, but over 73% of voters decided against it. The decision as to which system will work best for Oakland in the future has always been, and remains, completely up to Oakland voters.

But to the extent there's always been a debate about whether the Oakland City Council is in the best position to evaluate someone's qualifications for the role of City Attorney, it is certainly worth noting which candidate Oakland's Councilmembers have endorsed in this election. I am the only candidate in this race who has been endorsed by all eight current Oakland Councilmembers, seven former Oakland Councilmembers (including several who went on to become Mayor), the current City Attorney Barbara Parker, and every other Oakland City Attorney since 1987 (who were both appointed and elected).

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
- b. Discuss your perspectives on:
 - i. The balance of cases assigned to in-house vs outside counsel
 - ii. The amount of money the city has historically paid in legal judgements, and settlements
 - iii. The adequate staffing levels for the City Attorney's office and how to maintain high staff engagement levels/morale
- c. Describe the experience(s) from your past that should give Oaklanders confidence you can deliver on these goals?

Maintaining office morale is critical to the office's success. The City Attorney is only one person in an office of more than 80 people. It can be hard and complicated to manage a fast-paced office of that size. I have the experience that the job requires. I am extremely proud to have the overwhelming support of the attorneys in the office. The staff attorneys in the office are unionized. When their chapter took an anonymous vote, 98% of them voted to endorse me for City Attorney. I was genuinely moved because I strive to treat my colleagues with respect,



and to make sure they know they are valued. Their vote was a confirmation that I'm doing something right.

Part of respecting the folks in the office means honoring the hard work that they do every day. Everyone agrees that Oakland should strive to reduce outside counsel costs. It's one thing to identify that as a goal, and it's another thing to have a plan for how to get there. In order to reduce outside counsel costs, the City Attorney's office will have to keep more work in-house. I've witnessed first hand that the current staff in the office are hard-working professionals who are working at full capacity. So in order to keep more work in-house, the City will need to invest in additional staff. That will require Council action. As your next City Attorney, I will work to give the City Council the confidence to make that investment. My track record, and my broad endorsements, prove that I can build that trust.

Similarly, when it comes to reducing the City's legal judgments and settlements, we cannot just announce the goal. We have to have a plan to get there. The City, with the help of the City Attorney's office, has to get better at addressing the root causes of liability, such as deteriorating infrastructure and insufficient employee training. Let's be clear; managing risk in the City of Oakland is not just about saving the City money. What it's really about is protecting Oakland workers, residents and visitors so that they don't get actually injured in the first place. The best lawsuit is the one that is never filed.

I will identify ways that the City Attorney's office, in partnership with City Administration, can better track, analyze, and utilize data from the more than 500 claims and more than 150 lawsuits the office handles each year. I bring a curiosity, solution-oriented approach, and penchant for leveraging technology that will serve the office well. With a reasonable investment to upgrade the office's case-management software, and some thought-partnership and curiosity, the City Attorney's office and City Administration can undoubtedly find some valuable lessons hiding in all this data. For example:

- Are there commonalities in pothole-related accidents that can help us better prioritize street repairs?
- When officers are sued for unreasonable force, are there obscure patterns in the data that can help us revise OPD policies?
- If we study workplace harassment claims and lawsuits, what can we learn about the types of supervisor and manager training that may be most effective?

8. What policy areas are you eager to address as City Attorney?



Your City Attorney's office is home to a small but incredibly impactful team of litigators who proactively fight for equity and justice for Oaklanders. Clean air and water, safe and affordable housing, and fair and respectful workplaces are not luxuries, and they are not negotiable. They are human rights. And since all injustices fall disproportionately on people of color, protecting these rights is necessarily a matter of racial justice.

Over the years, our Affirmative Litigation team has taken on notorious landlords, human traffickers, unfair and discriminatory employers, operators of abusive independent living facilities, Trump's Census Bureau, chemical manufacturers polluting our waterways, lead-paint manufacturers, opioid companies, and many other bad actors. For the team to continue its success, your next City Attorney must truly understand and value the work, and must have the experience to support the work.

One of my highest priorities will be expanding this work, and doing so in a way that doesn't cost Oakland taxpayers. In addition to obeying the law and fixing the harms they've caused, wrongdoers should reimburse the city for the costs associated with enforcement, including attorneys fees. Oakland's Affirmative Litigation team has secured over \$48M since 2017 for the city and its residents, including millions of dollars in attorneys fees.

In 2023, as your Chief Assistant City Attorney, I helped show the City Council a way to further solidify the team's future without taking resources away from any other city services. Three of the nine staff-attorney positions on the team were previously temporary positions, meaning the incumbents had less job security and less pay than their counterparts. With my vision and help, the City made these positions permanent. And because the positions have been (and will continue to be) revenue-generating, the City was able to make this investment at no cost to our general fund!

But I've looked at the numbers, and I'm convinced that the team still isn't quite right-sized. Simply put, the team's still too small to take on all the civil-rights and quality-of-life cases that need to be prosecuted. I will look to grow the team, and force wrong-doers (and not Oakland taxpayers) to foot the bill.

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:
- Summarize the largest contributors to Oakland's budget challenges and your understanding of why previous Councils/Mayoral administrations have not solved the issue(s).
 - 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.



- 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.
- d. Discuss your perspectives on:
 - i. Major sources of general fund revenues, and any recent trends or changes
 - ii. Major general fund expenditures, and any recent trends or changes
 - iii. Unfunded liabilities, including pensions and deferred maintenance, and any recent trends or changes
- e. Describe how you will maintain objectivity despite pressure and specific budget asks by the groups and organizations that have endorsed you.
- f. Describe the experience(s) from your past that should give Oaklanders confidence you can deliver on these goals?

Oakland's Charter is quite clear that the City Council, and not the City Attorney, control the City's purse strings. When voters elect Councilmembers and send them to City Hall with budget priorities and mandates, they deserve to know that their City Attorney isn't going to try to tip the scales or insert themselves into the Council's deliberations.

That said, the City Attorney can be a thought partner to help the Council find ways to secure outside funding from county, state, federal, and private sources to pay for City expenses. The City Attorney can help the administration and Council be creative and focused when it comes to reducing costs and waste, and when it comes to identifying lost revenue opportunities. And as discussed above, the City Attorney can help the city manage risk and reduce litigation costs.

But Oaklanders can rest assured that when it comes time to vote on a budget, I will respect the authority vested in the City Council.

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:

- a. Describe in what ways the City of Oakland is meeting and/or not meeting your definition of good government.
- b. Summarize what changes you would make in order to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of city governance and increase transparency.
- c. Answer how Oakland City Council can provide greater oversight and public accountability in contracting, grant-making, and outcomes/performance management.

As City Attorney, I will continue working tirelessly with my team to make your local government as responsive and efficient as possible.



I know that good government starts with transparency and public access. We'll get the best outcomes if we make it as easy as possible for the public and the media to: 1) see and understand what the city's government is doing; and 2) provide input in meaningful ways. Sometimes the outcome may be that we collectively uncover and redress serious government fraud or abuse. Other times, the outcome may simply be that someone from outside City Hall catches a mistake or comes up with a smarter way of doing something. We're all in this together, making decisions collectively through real discourse. And we all have something to contribute, not just the people with the loudest voices or the most power. So the more understandable, accessible and responsive we can make our local democracy, the better off we'll all be.

I am a true believer in transparency for transparency's sake. In 2019, the enactment of SB 1421 ushered in a new era of transparency for police records. While some law enforcement agencies were caving to the pressure from police-officer associations to interpret the law narrowly, my team and I stood up for full transparency and never wavered. I immediately worked to secure funding, raised my hand to do the work, and hired and trained qualified professionals. The project has taken time. But the end result is that Oakland has produced tens of thousands of pages of police-personnel files that shine a light on the inner workings of Oakland's police department. And the City recently unveiled an online database that's designed to make it easier for journalists, researchers, and members of the public to access police-personnel records. That database was my brainchild.

I am also focused on making our city government more efficient. When I first joined the office a decade ago, I worked closely with the city's finance department to put forth a ballot measure to restructure a city-run pension system (OMERS) that had been closed to new members for decades. When Measure EE passed in 2014 with over 73% approval, Oakland voters ensured that city retirees continued to receive their pensions, and simultaneously reduced the City's administrative overhead by nearly \$1 million annually. Since becoming your Chief Assistant City Attorney, I have served as parliamentarian at City Council meetings to help ensure they run smoothly, I was instrumental in making sure Council meetings would continue to offer hybrid / Zoom participation even after COVID emergency orders were lifted, and I worked closely with your Council President to make smart and common-sense changes to the Council's rules of procedure. I also worked on our recent good-government charter amendment which, among other things, established term limits for Council members. The resulting ballot measure (Measure X) passed with 80% approval in 2022.

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.

I believe this is a question we should ask of our candidates for City Council. As City Attorney, I will give the City Council expert legal advice to facilitate the decisions they have to make. But I understand that it is not the place of the City Attorney to try to impose their own policy goals on the Council.

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?

For Oakland businesses to thrive, we must improve public safety. Oakland's vision for public safety and violence prevention must be comprehensive and holistic. I have worked for years to make that vision a reality, and I am uniquely qualified to help navigate the legal challenges that lie ahead.

Reimagining and improving public safety in Oakland is ongoing, complex work. In 2021, our Reimagining Public Safety Task Force, commissioned by Councilmembers Loren Taylor and Nikki Fortunato Bas, recommended ways for Oakland to increase community safety, including investing in programs to address the root causes of crime, developing a community response system for non-violent 911 calls, and relying on civilian professionals to investigate police-misconduct.

That same year, our City Council prioritized many of the recommendations, such as investing in the Mobile Assistance Community Responders of Oakland program (MACRO), bolstering the Department of Violence Prevention in its mission to interrupt violence, moving police-misconduct investigations to the Community Police Review Agency (CPRA), and supporting our independent Office of the Inspector General in its mandate to promote best policing-practices at OPD. Our Council also demanded that OPD work to recruit new officers from underrepresented backgrounds, including more local officers and more female officers.

I wholeheartedly agree that policing in Oakland must be part of a larger public safety and violence prevention system. To maximize public trust and safety, police departments cannot be stand-alone institutions. Community oversight is an excellent start. But the ultimate goal is to fully weave OPD into the larger cultural fabric of Oakland, to make it an integral part of the community it serves with deeply shared values. And I wholeheartedly believe that a lack of diversity in policing - and the underrepresentation of women in particular - undermines public safety. I believe the research is clear, and I've seen it with my own eyes. Attracting and retaining a diverse police force is crucial.



As we continue to achieve this vision, we will reduce crime, attract and retain diverse officers, and identify and deal with problem officers. We will also make sure our officers can focus on preventing and investigating crimes, rather than on work that's better suited for our civilian professionals. The stakes for Oakland couldn't be higher, and there will always be legal pitfalls at the federal, state and local levels that we must successfully navigate as we go. For example, we have to find ways to make our police force more diverse and remove micro-barriers in the application and onboarding processes, but without running afoul of California's onerous Prop 209 restrictions.

As the former head of the office's Labor and Employment unit and the current Chief Assistant City Attorney, I have the hands-on experience to work effectively with our City leaders, our police-oversight professionals, our violence-intervention professionals, and our sworn professionals - in partnership with community and community leaders - to make sure Oakland's vision for comprehensive public safety continues to become a reality.

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

Oakland's City Attorney has a duty to work collaboratively with the elected city and county, including the Mayor and the District Attorney. Likewise, the City Attorney has to write impartial ballot questions and summaries for local measures. Oakland voters should have confidence that their next City Attorney will remain neutral when it comes to placing measures on the ballot, to ensure that it's entirely up to the voters to decide what's best for Oakland. And Oakland voters should have confidence that when they choose other leaders, their next City Attorney won't play favorites or push their own personal agenda. I will work collaboratively and productively with whomever Oakland sends to City Hall, and I have the temperament and track record to prove it.