



## 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:** Rowena Brown

**Email:** [Info@rowenaforoakland.com](mailto:Info@rowenaforoakland.com)

**Phone Number:** 510.734.0025

**Office & District Sought:** Oakland City Council At Large

**Campaign Website:** <https://www.rowenaforoakland.com>

**Social Media Handles**

- Twitter: @liveundefined
- Facebook: @Rowena.foroakland
- Instagram: @Rowena.foroakland
- LinkedIn: Rowena Brown
- TikTok: N/A

**Expected total Fundraising Amount:** \$250,000

**Funds Raised To Date:** N/A

### General Questions

1. What is your background/experience in Oakland?

**After losing my last remaining parent at 17, I attended an optician apprenticeship training program and studied on the job to be a licensed optician. I would served as General Store Manager of Optical Sales and Training & Development for eight years across the San Fransisco Bay Area. During this time, I was the West Coast Captain for the company’s non-profit organization, focused on ensuring that lower-income families had access to eye exam and glasses. I worked specifically with Oakland Unified School District to provide this essential service to K-12 students.**

**After being recruited to join the Kaiser Optical Department in Oakland, I decided to pursue higher education, attending, Laney Community College and obtaining my associate's degree in African**



American Studies. I transferred to Mills College located in East Oakland and obtained my bachelor's in international relations and comparative governments. I was also able to study abroad in Beijing & Shanghai at the School of Economics. Additionally, I worked as an 8th Grade Civics Education Teacher in East Oakland Schools, focused on equipping our future leaders to create change in their local neighborhoods. This experience created a strong passion to continue working on behalf of East Oaklanders and became a founding member of the Women's Social Entrepreneurship Center, a program focused on previously incarcerated women, receiving training to start their own businesses.

While completing various volunteer projects in the community, I would apply to serve as a constituent coordinator, for a recently elected council member in East Oakland. I would serve in this role, at one of the most challenging times in our nation's history, the COVID-19 pandemic. I worked daily to ensure that residents had all the updates about COVID including testing and eventually vaccination sites. I worked with multiple organizations, to ensure access to food resources, PPE, and home supplies. I worked alongside faith leaders, to reach out to all businesses about applying for financial assistance and supported grant application/loan questions. And, at the same time community members were facing economic distress, I provided resources to support them with paying rent, utility bills, and for those that were unjustly evicted - I connected them to legal resources and housing. In this role, I was able to help support community engagement and research on various pieces of legislation being presented at council meetings, supported comprehensive communications, and worked in the creation of the Reimagining Public Safety Taskforce.

My experience working on behalf of East Oakland, made me determined to learn more about the language of the law, while studying at the University of California, Law San Francisco - I drafted legislation to help to improve civic education in CA schools. And, now in my third year serving as District Director for State Assemblymember Mia Bonta, I have led providing for Oaklanders during hard times, FEMA relief after major storms impacting Oakland, I have provided letters of support advocating for traffic calming measures throughout the city, showed up on the front lines while our Oakland teachers were on strike, worked to address human trafficking and advocated for resources for community-based organizations that serve as trusted partners in our neighborhoods.

I have been able to provide legislative fixes to issues that have plagued West Oaklanders for decades - writing and uplifting legislation after a toxic fire in August 2023. AB2851 will serve to regulate the metal shredding industry, working to ensure all can breathe fresh, clean air. My leadership in Oakland has proven that I am fully equipped for the role of Oakland City Councilmember At Large.

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

#### **Challenges**

- **Addressing Gun Violence & Community Safety: I am dedicated to keeping our community safe and putting an end to senseless gun violence. As someone who lost both of my parents, I understand firsthand that these cycles must end. I will support comprehensive policing models**

*Paid for by Empower Oakland Committee, PO Box 7669 Oakland FPPC ID# 1466279*



that keep our community safe, including mental health interventions and programs while ensuring strict police accountability and protection of our most marginalized residents. I have strongly advocated for alternatives to policing models like MACRO, in the City of Oakland.

- **Addressing Homelessness:** Homelessness must be addressed through comprehensive strategies. I will work to provide culturally competent care, build affordable housing, and work to provide mental health services, and substance abuse therapy to all.
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 Council At Large to create an Oakland that is clean, safe, and equitable for all while establishing transformative change alongside the Oakland community. I am running for the seat because it provides an opportunity to advocate for various communities across Oakland, allowing my public service to have a reach across our community. Historically, Districts 3, 5, 6, and 7 have been under-served for decades and within this seat, I can bring representation to our entire community. In addition, I bring a unique perspective and skillset, both as a community leader/advocate and also working across governmental agencies at the local, county, and state levels. I will put my skillset to work legislatively and foster collaboration across agencies for the betterment of all Oaklanders.

This race has multiple candidates running, however, *I know that my experience, commitment to serve, and integrity distinguish me from the other candidates in the race.* My lived experience of overcoming challenges and internal perseverance equips me with the tools to overcome Oakland's disheartening situation of increased crime, homelessness, and economic insecurity. My time working for local and state government has been marked by moments that required all staff to meet the moment, to provide the community with resources in the wake of uncertainty. I currently work across governmental agencies to address issues that arise, I've worked on legislation to improve civics education in schools, improve air quality regulations, support victims of human trafficking, and legislation to streamline school districts to build on unused property. I am the best candidate to roll of my sleeves and get the job done from day one.

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

Yes, I have worked in local and state government for five years and on behalf of Oaklanders for a decade. My biggest accomplishment is reflected in how far I've been able to care for myself, my family, and Oaklanders. I remember feeling an indescribable sadness after losing my parents, thinking about how would I ever have the life, I had dreamed. I am very proud of myself for holding on to the many lessons, I learned early on about showing up for others and being a selfless servant. My life has also been marked with a strong desire to empower others to be changemakers and work to envision a just and equitable world.



## Accomplishments:

- **Youngest General Store Manager in the Company, 2008-2012**
- **Associated Students of Laney College, President, 2014**
- **Studied Abroad in Shanghai & Beijing, China, 2015**
- **Associated Students of Mills College Vice President and Diversity Chair for Board of Trustee, 2017**
- **Changemaker of the Year, 2017 \*my work as a civics education teacher.**
- **Mills College, Bachelor of Arts, International Relations & Comparative Government 2019**
- **East Oakland Community Champion, 2020-21**
- **Campaign Manager & District Director for State Assemblymember Mia Bonta. 2021- present**
- **The University of California, Law San Francisco 2023, concentration in environmental law**
- **AB1520, AB2851, AB2020**
- **Coalition of Young Scholars, I take great pride in training future leaders.**

## Oakland City Council

5. **What specific and measurable improvements in public safety will you deliver for Oaklanders in 2 years? 4 years? Please describe how you plan to deliver these public safety improvements. As part of your response, please:**
- a. Summarize what existing public safety investments you might increase, reduce or eliminate to ensure adequate resources for you to meet your goal.
  - b. Discuss your perspectives on:
    - i. The effectiveness of Oakland's non-sworn responses to public safety issues. Which ones (if any) are successful and should be continued? Which ones (if any) are not successful and should be discontinued?
    - ii. The appropriate staffing level of sworn police officers for the city of Oakland (provide a specific number of officers you would like to see in place by December 2028).
    - iii. Your prioritized strategies for addressing various types of crime, including gun violence, retail robbery, bipping, residential burglary, traffic violence, and any others.
  - c. Describe the experience(s) from your past that should give Oaklanders confidence you can deliver on these goals?

***We know that Public Safety is on the top of everyone's mind, so that is my first priority.***

**I will work to improve response times, collaborate with police leadership to understand the staffing shortage and work to increase the number of sworn officers. As council member, I will ensure that law enforcement has the resources and public accountability it needs to keep our communities safe; responsible policing that our community trusts as well as community-building initiatives will serve to combat violence, robberies, and bipping.**



**In addition, I will work very closely to address the root cause of crime by connecting with the Department of Violence Prevention and ensuring that have the tools to do their best work, and help recruit community leaders for their vacant positions. I will focus on Public Safety Ambassadors Programs to support business corridors, this will support more walkable environments across the city. Many of the calls for service are for individuals who are unhoused and facing mental instability, I will address this, ensuring that MACRO can assist these individuals. I will work to implement the recommendations of the Reimaging Public Safety Taskforce, many of which focus on creative solutions to keep the community safe. Lastly, we need to ensure accountability, restorative justice, community services, and prosecution for those repeat offenders of crimes. And, as we enter 2025, we will have new legislation, aimed at addressing retail theft across the State of Ca. Oaklanders can count on my solution-driven and accountable leadership to achieve an Oakland which we all can take pride!**

- 6. What specific and measurable improvements in Oakland’s homelessness and housing affordability crisis will you deliver for Oaklanders in 2 years? 4 years? How do you plan to deliver these homelessness and housing affordability wins for Oakland? As part of your response, please:**
- a. Describe the biggest problems our city faces that keep us from solving the housing crisis.
  - b. Summarize what homelessness/housing investments you might advance, reduce, or eliminate to ensure adequate resources are available to meet the goals you stated above. What trade-offs might need to be considered in distributing resources between different solutions?
  - c. Discuss your perspectives on:
    - i. The respective roles of affordable (below-market-rate) housing and market-rate housing
    - ii. The City’s Housing Element and proposed zoning reforms
    - iii. Oakland’s Encampment Management Policy, implementation of it to date, and improvements needed moving forward
    - iv. The City/County’s approach to mental health and substance abuse treatment
  - d. Describe the experience(s) from your past that should give Oaklanders confidence you can deliver on these goals?

**I personally realize that we must tackle the homelessness crisis by creating more deeply affordable housing for all income levels, we must provide more comprehensive mental health support and substance abuse therapy. In order to support, the unhoused community, it requires multiple responses, those living in their car, down on their luck, should be directed to service providers ready to place them in housing and provide pathways for employment. I also would want to create more transitional housing helping to get seniors, women, and children off the streets immediately. I strongly believe that Alameda County could take on more of a supportive role in providing land for more safe RV and Car parking zones.**

**In addition, we have recent legislation passed at the State level to support churches to build housing on their properties - we must seek funding for these efforts. I toured a four-block radius with East Oakland Faith Leaders and if the initiative was funded it would have provided over 200 units of housing. As**



**council member, I am focused not only in caring for the unhoused community but really creating solutions to help Oakland meet its housing allocation of 26,000 homes by 2031.**

**The City of Oakland has an Encampment Management policy, however, like most city legislation, the issue lies in the implementation. Within the policy, I am focused on ensuring the safety of all city workers, tasked with outreach and implementation. I believe tackling this issue can be done with community involvement and care.**

- 7. What specific and measurable improvements will you deliver with respect to Oakland's public infrastructure in 2 years? 4 years? How do you plan to deliver these improvements? As part of your response, please:**
- a. Summarize the biggest problem(s) Oakland faces, how we can address them, and what trade-offs might need to be considered (if applicable).
  - b. Discuss any specific improvements you expect to make during your 4-year term related to:
    - i. Blight, Litter and Dumping
    - ii. Road repair & repaving
    - iii. Bike/pedestrian safety and public transportation
    - iv. Streetscape improvements (trees, parklets, etc)
    - v. Stormwater management
  - c. Describe the experience(s) from your past that should give Oaklanders confidence you can deliver on these goals?

**I would commend the City of Oakland on the great strides that have made in providing more bikeable and pedestrian improvements. However, while working for the City of Oakland, I found that East and West Oakland were impacted by more blight, illegal dumping, in need of urgent road repairs, and many uncut trees. In addition, City Departments effectively applied for State-funded grants but lacked the staffing to project manage infrastructure improvements to implement street design for traffic calming, and remodels to aging properties. On day one, I will be focused on supporting the Department of Transportation, bringing on the engineers and planners to complete projects timely.**

- 8. Please describe how you plan to address Oakland's immediate fiscal budget crisis AND long-term structural budget deficit. What specific and measurable improvements will you deliver in 2 years? 4 years? 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).
  - b. Describe how you will reduce expenses (including cuts you would make to specific programs) that will 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?

**My goal is to create a sustainable budget for Oakland's future - prioritizing essential services and workers. A sustainable budget values the needs of all of Oakland residents and one that aims to make whole historically underserved communities. A fiscally responsible budget brings all stakeholders to the table, realizing you have to make tradeoffs. In my current role as District Director for State Assemblymember Mia Bonta, I have worked to uplift the needs and priorities of Oaklanders, serving to ensure that MACRO, the Cities Alternative to Policing model remains funded despite its funding reduction this budget year - this takes foresight and the ability to plan ahead. There are many state-funded programs and resources that the City of Oakland should apply to help supplement its services and departments. I plan to pull the curtain back, fully staffing the City Auditor's office, so we can get a better understanding of what has occurred, allowing us to better plan for the future. Lastly, a sustainable budget process is supported by robust community engagement, to make sure we are listening to the needs of our constituents.**

9. **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.

**Good governance involves complete transparency and accountability. I believe that community engagement is essential to ensure that community needs and worker safety are first and foremost in everyday governance. Each council member should send out communications about agenda items and ask for input, all too often community gets wind of an important vote and must mobilize overnight to ensure essential resources are preserved. This must change!**

**Additionally, we should have a clear understanding of grants that are being applied, departments taking the lead, outcomes, and implementation. Mandatory reporting allows for more transparency. We must bring our City up to speed with tech and innovation across all departments, especially with the amount of climate-focused and innovation grants being offered at the State level.**



10. **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

11. **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.

**Any vote that negatively impacted essential services for workers and neighborhoods already suffering from a lack of investment. I am specifically talking about budget votes.**

12. **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?**

**Cost of commercial rent, reduced patronage due to increase in crime and burglary. I have written letters of advocacy to the Governor/GOBIZ on behalf of Oakland businesses since 2023 - and the needs are clear: Support if the business is burglarized/vandalized ie facade improvements, Grants not loans. Safety for their employees and customers and city-supported marketing to advertise their business.**

13. **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)