



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: Iris Merriouns

Email: irisforoakland@gmail.com

Phone Number: (510) 435-7044

Office & District Sought: District 7

Campaign Website: Coming soon

Social Media Handles

- Twitter: Coming soon
- Facebook: Coming soon
- Instagram: Coming soon
- LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/iris-merriouns-97860aaa/>
- TikTok: N/A

Expected total Fundraising Amount: \$75,000

Funds Raised To Date: N/A

General Questions

1. What is your background/experience in Oakland?

As a former Chief of Staff to Oakland City Councilmembers, I worked for over 25 years on the front lines in shaping policies that directly affect our community, especially in East Oakland. I have focused on neighborhood revitalization, public safety improvement, good-paying job creation, and ensuring East Oaklanders have access to affordable housing and essential services. Being a long-term resident of District 7 and community activist on behalf of East Oakland, I am committed to making our city a better place for all.



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

The two most prominent issues that represent the biggest challenge to Oakland today are around governmental transparency and public safety. Many residents of District 7 feel entirely disconnected from City Hall, seeing as there has been a lack of communication about policies, projects, and priorities. This lack of transparency has led to growing mistrust in local government and created more frustration with the slow pace of progress on critical issues.

Another immediate concern is public safety; escalations of crime rates involving break-ins and other property crimes— have shaken our community's sense of security. This has made it hard for businesses to thrive, especially along the Hegenberger Corridor. Safety concerns disturb the residents' day-to-day living and keep potential investors and companies from setting up shop in our city.

But through it all, Oakland's strengths are remarkable in their own right and speak to our resilience. We have such a rich culture through our restaurants, the arts, and music. Another bright spot is our deep sense of community and history of being a city that is a maker through the people who live and grow up here. We have some of the most beautiful parks, which serve as vital gathering spots that bring us together and highlight the natural beauty of our city.

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 office because I believe Oakland is on the wrong track, and it's time for a change in leadership that prioritizes practical solutions and strong governance. With over 25 years of experience serving as Chief of Staff for Oakland City Councilmembers, I have a deep understanding of our city's challenges and the know-how to address them effectively. I've dedicated my life to advocating for East Oakland, fighting for public safety, affordable housing, and economic opportunities for our residents. My experience working on the frontlines of local government has equipped me with the skills to navigate complex issues and deliver results that matter.

What sets me apart is my unwavering commitment to practical, results-driven leadership. I'm not just talking about change—I've made it happen, and I'm ready to do it again. Oakland deserves a leader who not only understands our challenges but also has the proven experience and vision to guide us toward a safer, more prosperous, and equitable future. I'm running because I know I can make a real difference for Oakland, and I'm ready to roll up my sleeves and get to work.



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

Before running for office, I spent over 25 years working in City Hall, where I was deeply involved in shaping policies and initiatives that directly impacted our community. My role allowed me to be at the forefront of driving real change in Oakland, working on everything from improving public safety to creating economic opportunities.

One of my most significant accomplishments was leading efforts to revitalize neglected areas, particularly in District 7. We transformed blighted neighborhoods, brought thousands of good-paying jobs to the area, and developed programs that supported first-time homebuyers. I also played a crucial role in enhancing public services, such as improving transportation access and creating youth programs in partnership with institutions like Children's Hospital and UCSF. These initiatives didn't just address immediate needs—they laid the groundwork for long-term, sustainable growth in our community.

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?

While some current city leaders may point to selective statistics to claim that everything is improving, I know the reality is more complex. As someone who has lived and worked in East Oakland for decades, I hear the real fears my neighbors have about public safety. People are scared to leave their cars on the street, and with good reason. In 2023 alone, nearly 15,000 vehicles were stolen in Oakland—1 in 30 residents experienced



this violation. That number is more than a statistic; it's a reflection of the crisis we are facing. While there has been some decline in vehicle thefts in 2024, it's crucial that our leaders acknowledge and respect the deep concerns and traumas our community feels, rather than dismissing them.

In the next two years, I will focus on tangible improvements in public safety by better coordinating our resources and investing in strategies that work. A key part of this plan is strengthening Oakland's Ceasefire strategy, which has shown promise in reducing gang violence and shootings. By increasing support for community outreach workers, I aim to significantly reduce gun violence in our neighborhoods within two years. Additionally, I will tackle the critical issue of emergency response times by increasing the number of 911 dispatchers and enhancing coordination with county, state, and federal emergency services to ensure faster and more effective responses.

To combat property crimes like bipping and residential burglaries, I will work to activate public spaces and vacant storefronts through community events and smart environmental design.

Looking further ahead, my vision for public safety involves building a comprehensive and sustainable approach. Over the next four years, I will focus on staffing and resource allocation to ensure that Oakland has the right mix of personnel to address our city's varied needs. This means not just increasing the number of sworn police officers, but also ensuring we have enough unarmed staff, such as ambassadors trained in de-escalation, to maintain a visible, positive presence in our communities. By 2028, I aim to have a fully staffed force capable of addressing everything from violent crime to traffic safety with the right tools and strategies.

It's clear that we need enough field officers to respond to priority calls—35 officers aren't enough. We also need sufficient staff to manage investigations, which could be supplemented by unarmed personnel. Ambassadors, who are less costly than sworn officers, are essential too. Downtown's fifty ambassadors are a good start, but it's not enough. We need more ambassadors walking or biking through our communities to build relationships and enhance safety.

To make these improvements sustainable, I will reevaluate our current public safety investments, increasing support for non-sworn responses that work—like community ambassadors—while reducing reliance on less effective measures. For example, I will advocate for more parking enforcement officers, who can also serve as a visible deterrent by patrolling neighborhoods.

My experience as Chief of Staff for Oakland City Councilmembers, where I've managed complex initiatives and delivered under pressure, has prepared me to lead these efforts. I've spent years working across government agencies and with community leaders to



achieve meaningful outcomes, and I'm ready to bring that same commitment to enhancing public safety for all of Oakland.

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?

Addressing Oakland's homelessness and housing affordability crisis demands a mix of immediate actions and long-term strategies. For the long term, making the Bay Area more affordable will require us to build new housing, particularly near transit centers and downtown, where there is room to grow. I support an "all of the above" approach to housing because it took us over 40 years of underproduction and disinvestment in affordable housing to get into this crisis, and it will take an "all hands on deck" effort to fix it.

There are still many areas in Oakland that are underutilized, even when fully developed. Commercial corridors and areas near transit could accommodate taller buildings, providing more housing for residents and customers for local businesses. Oakland, especially areas like East Oakland, has a large number of vacant and underutilized sites. One reason these sites remain underdeveloped is our outdated zoning code. We can create a more vibrant, walkable, and community-centered city if we allow these vacant lots to be transformed into new housing.

In the short term, it's crucial that we refine our approach to managing encampments, which currently lacks a clear connection to actual housing solutions. We need an actionable plan that aims to reduce homelessness within 2-4 years, setting realistic goals for transitioning people into stable housing. This includes making encampments safer by providing enhanced social



services, improving fire safety, and offering temporary shelter options like cabins and hotels. Additionally, I will push to use Oakland's vacant land for emergency shelters and affordable housing construction. Our neighbors living in RVs or tents deserve a safe space while they connect with services and work towards long-term housing.

We cannot ignore the struggles of those who work hard but still find housing costs overwhelming. Solutions like basic income or rent subsidies could offer immediate relief and prevent more people from falling into homelessness. None of these solutions will be possible without a balanced budget and immediate investments. The city must improve its collaboration with the county, particularly as new supervisors take office, to align our efforts. Mental health and substance abuse treatment, which fall more under the county's purview, are areas where the City of Oakland has historically struggled to work constructively with county leaders. With a new group of council members taking office soon, I see this as an excellent opportunity to build stronger relationships, and I'm excited to help make that happen.

My experience as Chief of Staff for Oakland City Councilmembers has given me a deep understanding of the importance of collaboration in city planning and land use. Over the years, I've worked across multiple government agencies, focusing on creating resilient and thriving communities. The most effective solutions will come from working together—across all levels of government, with developers, and with the community at large.

- 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?

It's not a lack of funding that plagues our public infrastructure in Oakland; it's an inefficient project management problem on the part of our city council and staff. Having worked 25 years in city hall, I know that important initiatives are delayed because we go over things rather than implement them efficiently. One way we can do this is by streamlining our contracting so that, once we make decisions, they're implemented quickly, without unnecessary delay.



An important area is renegotiating Oakland's waste management contracts. As it stands, citizens are allowed only one bulky pickup a year, which has produced a massive problem for illegal dumping. Allow unlimited pickups, and with this service expansion, we can achieve significant inroads toward reducing blight, litter, and illegal dumping in our neighborhoods.

Regarding road repair and repaving, we should pre-authorize DOT to carry out the needed repairs cut through the red tape. We can make roads safer and more sustainable by redesigning these streets to accommodate biking and walking better while saving on future repaving expenses.

This is where my experience as Chief of Staff truly comes into play. I've spent years trying to navigate the maze of government to secure that funding from county, state, and federal sources. Through my office, Oakland will have infrastructure improvements delivered efficiently, streets made safer and more sustainably for all.

- 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?
- 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.

I've seen how great ideas within city departments often go unshared due to strained working relationships between the City Council, the Auditor, and the City Administrator's office. I aim to create a collaborative environment where these insights are openly shared, and all parties work together toward common goals.

One of the most significant changes I want to implement is reorganizing city efforts around clear, focused initiatives. This means breaking down the silos between departments and forming cross-departmental teams that collaborate on specific priorities. Another change I want to make is to make city government more accessible and transparent for everyone, even for those who might not always agree with my position. I believe it's essential for people to know exactly what I'm working on and why.

We must also establish more measurable outcomes and metrics for our city's efforts. During the budgeting season, we should adopt a comprehensive work plan that clearly outlines the expected results for every dollar spent. If we allocate \$50 million for road paving, the public should know exactly how many miles of roads we plan to pave. If we're investing in violence prevention, we need clear goals to measure the impact of those dollars.

The Oakland City Council can strengthen oversight and public accountability by setting clear expectations and performance metrics for every contract, grant, and initiative. Regular audits and progress reports should be the norm, ensuring that the public can track outcomes and hold the government accountable.

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.
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.
The most impactful Council vote in recent years was the 2024 mid-cycle budget decision. In my opinion, the decision to plug a massive structural budget deficit with one-time funds from a potential Coliseum sale—still not finalized to this day—was fiscally



irresponsible. This approach does not address the underlying financial issues Oakland faces and creates a precarious situation for our city's future stability.

Had I been on the Council, I would have pushed for more transparency and accountability from the City Administration and Finance Department. It's crucial for the Council to have access to detailed financial information to go line by line through the budget, cutting unnecessary spending and focusing on providing core city services. Public safety and essential constituent services, like permitting, should be prioritized, while other non-essential expenditures must be reevaluated. We need to restore fiscal discipline and ensure that we are making decisions that will keep our city financially sustainable in the long term.

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?

Oakland businesses, especially in East Oakland, are grappling with significant challenges, including ongoing break-ins and property crimes that create a hostile environment for local enterprises. The recent closure of businesses like In-N-Out along the Hegenberger corridor is a stark reminder of these issues. When businesses are repeatedly broken into or when people avoid these areas out of fear that their cars will be vandalized, it's clear that the current approach is not working. I've seen firsthand how these challenges can severely impact the economic vitality of our neighborhoods.

To address these concerns, we need a multifaceted approach. While increasing police presence in certain areas is important, we must also explore creative urban design solutions like parklets and street closures to enhance the vibrancy and safety of our business districts.

We must create a business-friendly environment that encourages investment, which is crucial, especially in areas like East Oakland. When the City Council signals that certain businesses aren't welcome, it discourages growth and job creation. Instead, we should embrace businesses that want to establish themselves and invest in Oakland.

To help Oakland businesses thrive, we must make it easier for them to start and sustain operations, particularly in struggling areas. For example, suppose a bakery shop finds it hard to cover rent while only operating part-time. In that case, we should allow them to share their space with another business under a different permit, helping both businesses split the rent and remain viable. We also need to streamline the process for pop-up shops to operate in vacant spaces, reducing the need for these ventures to operate under the radar. By making it easier for businesses to flourish, we can revitalize areas like Hegenberger and ensure that East Oakland's economy remains strong.



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)
 - i. *No, see below*
- b. Would you vote to Recall Oakland Mayor Sheng Thao? (YES/NO)
 - i. *No, I would not vote to recall District Attorney Pamela Price and Mayor Sheng Thao. While I understand that many people have reservations regarding their criminal justice philosophies and how these might have impacted public safety, I also believe that the recall process should be reserved for clear cases of misconduct or examples of gross negligence in office, not as a response to policy disagreements. It's essential to allow elected officials to carry out their mandates and be held accountable through regular elections.*
- c. Would you vote to pass the Oakland Measure Z renewal? (YES/NO)
 - i. *Yes, I would vote for the renewal of the Oakland Measure Z. Measure Z has funded critical public safety and violence prevention programs. Renewing it will ensure that such critical funding for reducing crime and improving safety in our communities will continue.*
- d. Would you vote to pass California Prop 36 (makes changes to Prop 47)? (YES/NO)
 - i. *No, I would not vote to pass California Prop 36, changing Prop 47. I stand for keeping the inroads made by Prop 47 on nonviolent felony convictions and on rehabilitation. Improvement in the implementation of the changes, rather than changing the law, is what we should strive for.*