

## **Alexandria City Council Candidate Forum 5/13/2021 - Notes**

This candidate forum was sponsored by Tenants and Workers United and Grassroots Alexandria

### **I. Open-ended questions**

For these questions, candidates were given 30 seconds to respond to each question.

**1. Our working class friends and neighbors** tell us that they have a stronger relationship with the free clinic than with the Alexandria Health Department. This is particularly true for immigrant families. We as community leaders have been advocating for more healthcare access. This means that, in the future, we hope to depend more on the Alexandria Health Department. How will you expand healthcare services and programs to improve relationships between working class families and the Alexandria Health Department?

**Canek Aguirre:** We should provide more funding to Neighborhood Health, have more services, and expand services. Alexandria Health Department is making progress having added four workers who speak Spanish and Amharic.

**Sarah Bagley:** Working class and immigrant communities build their own networks and know how to make things work. Local govt needs to tap into what they've built as an immigrant community. Alexandria should reach out to those existing networks and leaders.

**Bill Campbell:** It's about Neighborhood Health. Neighborhood Health has doctors that are Black and Brown, but we need more voices of color in the places where services are provided. We need more diversity.

**John Chapman:** We should give more resources to Neighborhood Health. Those are the people who are doing the work in the community. The Alexandria Health Department should be a better partner for non-profits doing the work.

**Alyia Gaskins:** I am a public health professional. We should expand access, hire more community health workers as eyes and ears on the ground, bring more services in the community, and add mobile health services and pop up clinics.

**Kevin Harris:** I deal with healthcare regularly in my role in the Alexandria Redevelopment and Housing Authority (ARHA). We provide healthcare seminars.

**Florence King:** I had three children, lived in West End, didn't know about the Alexandria Health Dept over in Old Town. The AHD should have satellite offices in the neighborhoods.

**James Lewis:** I work in senior healthcare and worked for Black caucus on health issues, black healthcare trust. We need to make sure that care is culturally and linguistically appropriate, staff need training, access to resources, and to train people where they are.

**Kirk McPike:** I've been speaking to communities who are having trouble with access to the health department. We should co-locate clinic services in the communities where they are needed.

**Patrick Moran:** Neighborhood Health works well with health department, building on strong relationship. We should continue this strong relationship, including the medical reserve corps. We should continue with proactive measures.

**Bill Rossello:** I am not familiar with Alexandria's specific shortcomings on healthcare. I feel that the city has lost a lot of trust. Alexandria must rebuild trust.

**Mark Shiffer:** Access to healthcare should be easy. Disparities in availability of healthcare and funding healthcare should be addressed. We need to get information out in multiple languages.

**Meronne Teklu:** Covid disproportionately affected communities of colors. We need to meet residents where they are and work with immigrant communities in their native languages.

**2. From 2000 to 2019, Alexandria lost 16,000 market-affordable units** due to market rent increases. Please give us your policy ideas for preserving and creating affordable housing in the City of Alexandria for the families that earn an Area Median Income 40% or below.

**Canek Aguirre:** We need to use every tool in the toolbox: density bonus, land trust, additional funding for deep affordability, and the full penny fund. We need to work to support every affordable housing project. I was in favor of the meal tax for affordable housing.

**Sarah Bagley:** We are not using the tools fully. We need to aggressively fund programs we already have, such as neighborhood stabilization, land trust.

**Bill Campbell:** We need to acknowledge the challenge and to try to inject compassion into capitalism. We need experienced people and desire, especially with Amazon coming in.

**John Chapman:** We need to take advantage of every opportunity and apply every tool to increase units. We need to save what we can, use density bonuses, and make sure developers are giving the community what is needed when they are building. We haven't pressed this issue enough.

**Alyia Gaskins:** I have managed affordable housing programs. We need to preserve existing affordable housing, strengthen right of first refusal, expand funding for new affordable units, and work to prevent evictions.

**Kevin Harris:** I deal with housing every day in my work at AHRA. We need to utilize public land, co-locate housing with other uses, and work with developers.

**Florence King:** Seniors can't afford property taxes. We need concessions on taxes for seniors.

**James Lewis:** We need an "all of the above" approach, to preserve existing housing and promote new developments. We need to look for opportunities.

**Kirk McPike:** This is the first issue I worked on. I favor an "all of the above" approach. In addition, we need affordable assisted living for seniors.

**Patrick Moran:** We need to ensure that there is prosperity. We can support this by improving child care and by working with communities.

**Bill Rossello:** We need a preference policy in affordable housing to give preference to those who live/work here already.

**Mark Shiffer:** With Amazon coming, housing prices will rise. We need public-private partnerships.

**Meronne Teklu:** We need greater investment in affordable housing and to take active steps on inclusion.

**3. Social unrest across the country** has forced individuals and communities to acknowledge the systemic inequities that still exist in communities of color. Tell us how you will work to dismantle structural white supremacy in Alexandria.

**Canek Aguirre:** I have been working on equity for 10 years. I started a Spanish speaking parent group, served on the board of TWU, and hired our first race and equity officer in city while on city council.

**Sarah Bagley:** We must be clear in our antiracist work: white residents need to listen, and trust. We must measure experiences, accurately address and resolve problems, and provide funding for these efforts.

**Bill Campbell:** No one needed national unrest to know about local inequality in Alexandria. We must make sure that we have fairness and equality in every question that is asked.

**John Chapman:** I am a former NAACP president. We need to call out policies or people that need to change and educate people on what needs to change. We need more community input and understanding. We need to fund policy change to obtain a level playing field.

**Alyia Gaskins:** We must work to increase conversations about white supremacy. We must build and shift power by creating opportunities to communicate get feedback. We must invest more in our communities.

**Kevin Harris:** We need to have more people of color on commissions. We must work towards more equitable outcomes.

**Florence King:** Alexandria is a diverse city; this diversity should be reflected in the people we hire. We need diversity in the advice that comes from our community.

**James Lewis:** Everything should be seen through an equity lens: public safety, housing, avoiding over-policing, public health, development and infrastructure, union labor, and educational equity.

**Kirk McPike:** We have an opportunity to truly live out our progressive values. We should work with the office of equity and inclusion. We need equity in education, and diversity in hiring. We need to connect with businesses to support diversity efforts.

**Patrick Moran:** It will take work, transparency, community involvement, upholding our progressive values, and students equipped with knowledge.

**Bill Rossello:** I've seen positive change in this area but there is still work left to do. I have done work in the criminal justice system and will focus on this issue.

**Mark Shiffer:** There is still work to be done. We need open dialog with vulnerable communities, to make sure that their experiences are acknowledged and acted on.

**Meronne Teklu:** This is a very complex issue. We need greater transparency and significant police reform.

**4. Our students led a successful campaign** to remove school resource officers from schools, redirecting funds from police to health services. What will be your commitment to build on this small step toward reimagining public safety ?

**Canek Aguirre:** I'm the one who introduced the budget memo to raise this issue and went on to support it during the add/delete budget process. Re-allocation of the funding was a first step. We need to consider further how we want officers to interact with youth and community.

**Sarah Bagley:** We need to reimagine public safety. Because 60% of gun related deaths are suicides, we need education on this issue and on gun laws. We need expanded use of de-escalation techniques and a better approach to the issue of domestic violence.

**Bill Campbell:** As a black man in America, I raised three kids through the ACPS school system. As a school board member I helped start family and community engagement in ACPS. Further work will be all about eliminating racist systems.

**John Chapman:** We need to demand accountability. We need to better include communities and to expand opportunities for people to understand their rights.

**Alyia Gaskins:** We need to work with communities to reinvent public safety. We need to ask what is needed for us to feel safe. We need to ask how we can hold law enforcement accountable. We need to focus on metrics and healthcare.

**Kevin Harris:** I have worked on a safety committee in the public housing authority. We need to build better relationships.

**Florence King:** In schools and communities, the biggest danger is not recognizing mental illness. We need teachers to refer students to public health services.

**James Lewis:** We need to avoid over-policing of people of color. We need to create more opportunities in communities of color so that more people of color will become law enforcement officers.

**Kirk McPike:** We need to put equity first in terms of public safety. We need to better fund social services.

**Patrick Moran:** I experience white privilege and don't know what it means to be intimidated in school. I appreciate the effort to counteract that feeling of intimidation.

**Bill Rossello:** I feel we didn't do enough to define the problem. We need a broader community conversation. I have heard from Latinos who are against the decision to remove police from schools. I have heard from both sides.

**Mark Shiffer:** We need to better fund and rely on professionals who are familiar with these issues.

**Meronne Teklu:** I congratulate the students and TWU organizers who obtained this result. I would support keeping police out of schools. We need a bigger conversation that includes the issue of accountability.

## II. Yes/No "Lightning Round" questions

For these questions, candidates were asked to respond by holding up a "yes" or a "no" sign in response to each policy idea. They were told that "no response" would be taken as a lack of support for that policy.

**1. Affordable housing is a major crisis.** If elected, will you support continuation of 1% of the meals tax dedicated to funding affordable housing?

**Yes:** All candidates

**2. At present, the affordable housing "penny fund"** provides only six-tenths of a penny for each \$1000 in real estate value. This produces \$2.6 million each year for affordable housing. Increasing the penny fund to a full penny would increase this annual amount to about \$4.3 million. Do you support increasing the penny fund to a full penny?

**Yes:** All Candidates

**3. Housing that is affordable** at 40% of the Area Median Income is considered working class housing. The income requirements would be between \$35,000-\$59,000, depending on the household size. In the case of city funded affordable housing, would you be in favor of requiring every new housing development to make at least 30% of all units affordable for working class families?

**Yes:** Aguirre, Bagley, Campbell, Chapman, Gaskins, Harris, King, Lewis, McPike, Rossello, Shiffer, Teklu

**No:** Moran

**4. Every child deserves equitable services** to eliminate disparities and allow all of Alexandria's children to succeed. If elected, would you support increased funding so that every four-year-old can attend preschool?

**Yes:** All candidates

**5. Students of color say that they are uncomfortable** with the presence of School Resource Officers in their schools. They tell us they feel over-disciplined and intimidated. Alexandria City Council voted to support these students by redirecting funds from police to health services. Will you commit to continuing this as a policy?

**Yes:** Aguirre, Bagley, Campbell, Chapman, Gaskins, Harris, King, McPike, Shiffer, Teklu

**No:** Lewis, Moran

**No answer:** Rossello

**6. Alexandria's Eviction Prevention Task Force** acts to help residents facing eviction, but does not have a hand in shaping policy. Do you support an expanded role for Alexandria's Eviction Prevention Task Force to recommend more effective and actionable policies to the City Council?

**Yes:** All candidates

**7. Mass transit in Alexandria supports residents**, particularly low-income residents, and helps us all do our part to address the climate emergency. Will you accelerate the development of bus rapid transit in the planned transit corridor along Duke Street?

**Yes:** Aguirre, Bagley, Campbell, Chapman, Gaskins, Harris, McPike, Moran, Shiffer, Teklu

**No:** King, Lewis, Rossello

**8. Many people fish in the Potomac** and its tributaries in Alexandria, and these residents disproportionately tend to be new immigrants, African Americans, and other people of color. While pollution of the river and tributaries is gradually improving with our RiverRenew project, we could do more. Will you dedicate city funds to better monitor the quality of the water and fish tissues and to inform the public of its findings?

**Yes:** Aguirre, Bagley, Campbell, Chapman, Gaskins, Harris, Lewis, McPike, Moran, Rossello, Shiffer, Teklu

**No:** King

### **III. Top Legislative Agenda Item**

During closing statements, candidates were asked to tell us their top-priority goal, if elected.

**Canek Aguirre:** I will continue work around equity to keep families in homes. Renters facing eviction should have a right to counsel.

**Sarah Bagley:** I will work for a safer community, gun safety education, and “red flag” laws.

**Bill Campbell:** I will press my colleagues to review every city policy through a lens of equity to eradicate biases and barriers and to add diversity in the seats at the table.

**John Chapman:** I will work on housing affordability and against eviction to keep people in their homes.

**Alyia Gaskins:** I will work to change the culture around the community engagement that shapes decisions.

**Kevin Harris:** I will work to ensure that boards and commissions represent our community so that all communities have a seat at the table.

**Florence King:** I will work to hear what people have to have to say, especially about the housing situation, which is a crisis.

**James Lewis:** I will work to address the lack of focus on affordable home ownership and to help seniors remain in their homes.

**Kirk McPike:** I will work to help Alexandria fully recover from COVID and will use Recovery Act funds to address long running issues, such as schools and broadband.

**Patrick Moran:** I will work to support job programs that match people with jobs out of high school. I am concerned that only 11% of city workers live in Alexandria.

**Bill Rossello:** I will work to make city government more responsive to residents

**Mark Shiffer:** I will work to implement universal pre-K, which is key to every child’s success. I will also work on also affordable housing, infrastructure, environment, ethics, and equity.

**Meronne Teklu:** I will take action on the All Alexandria Resolution, which is not yet funded. I will also work for affordable transportation, livable wages, police data transparency, and broadband.