

Alexandria City Council and Mayoral Candidate Forum 5/2/2024

Presented by Grassroots Alexandria, Tenants and Workers United, and the Northern Virginia
Branch of the Democratic Socialists of America

Candidates Present

- Canek Aguirre (D), Council candidate (incumbent)
 - Sarah Bagley (D), Council candidate (incumbent)
 - John Chapman (D), Council candidate (incumbent)
 - Abdel Elnoubi (D), Council candidate
 - Current ACPS School Board member, unable to stay for Q&A due to School Board meeting
 - Alyia Gaskins (D), Mayoral candidate (Council incumbent)
 - Jacinta Greene (D), Council candidate
 - Current ACPS School Board member, unable to stay for Q&A due to School Board meeting
 - Kevin Harris (D), Council candidate
 - Jonathan Huskey (D), Council candidate
 - James Lewis (D), Council candidate
 - Kirk McPike (D), Council candidate (incumbent)
 - Jesse O'Connell (D), Council candidate
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Open Ended Questions

1. Increasing development is threatening culturally rich working-class neighborhoods with displacement. How would you help protect these culturally rich areas and make it easier for current, working-class residents to remain in the city?

O'Connell

We need to protect market rate affordable housing and make sure units are safe. We need to identify and coordinate with community leaders in these neighborhoods and follow their lead.

McPike

I agree with O'Connell. Further, we need to provide competition and enforce consequences on bad landlords. We need to commit to dedicated affordable units and preserve market rate affordable using dedicated funds.

Lewis

Developers cannot be permitted to destroy the cultural heritage of the area; pathway to property ownership is important (over renting), because current residents are emotionally/socially invested in preserving their neighborhood

Huskey

This area is a cultural treasure. The Casa Chirilagua equity co-op is a good example of a model to protect against residents being pushed out and that ownership represented more money in the system. We should focus on rent stabilization and wage increases/union expansion as a way to increase residents' economic power. We should fight for rent-stabilization in Richmond.

Harris

Black residents are being and have been pushed out by development/redevelopment. The work of the Resolution 830 Committee is a positive force that is pushing for 1:1 replacement of affordable housing as redevelopment happens. We need to examine the effect of short-term rentals (e.g. Airbnb) on housing stock and possibly implement restrictions or disincentives.

Greene

It is important to keep Alexandria culturally diverse. We want to keep community members in neighborhoods and identify neighborhood leaders.

Gaskins

We need rental assistance and eviction prevention for residents; the ARISE guaranteed income program is part of this. We need planning tools for small businesses to preserve small business character. Adding designated affordable housing at the 40% AMI (working class) level is important.

Chapman

We should make more intensive use of municipal land as a component of a solution. Virginia is in the bottom half of states for housing trust funds; we need to do more in Richmond. We need to do more to attract nonprofit developers for partnerships.

Bagley

The ARISE guaranteed-income program is already keeping people housed in their neighborhood—we should expand this program. Higher wages and positive labor agreements

are also providing residents with increased economic power. Also, the fare-free DASH bus frees up money that residents can spend on housing.

Aguirre

I agreed that the ARISE program and fare-free DASH bus are important. Housing vouchers are also important. The city must use all tools at its disposal. We also need to examine the effect of short-term vacation rental on housing stock.

2. Successful transportation depends on people safely biking and walking from home to a transit stop. What would you do to improve safe biking and walking?

Aguirre

Council has spent four years working on problem intersections, with many successful improvements for pedestrians. Fare-free DASH has helped by encouraging pedestrian traffic.

Bagley

As a habitual cyclist, I understand cyclist issues. I'd like to increase bike/pedestrian safety by reducing vehicle speeds, pushing parked cars back from intersections, and creating more protected bike lanes. I've supported the Complete Streets program.

Chapman

I'd like to have protected bike lanes city-wide rather than only in some neighborhoods. Higher frequency, fare-free DASH and an increase in ADA-compliant sidewalks have been improvements to the pedestrian experience. I helped change rules to allow riding bikes on sidewalks when streets are unsafe.

Gaskins

I am personally focused on safety. I support the Vision Zero and Complete Streets programs. We need more bike lanes and improved lighting. We need to perform/increase resident surveys to identify dangerous intersections in neighborhoods.

Harris

Community engagement to improve road safety is very important. I am in favor of more protected bike lanes.

Huskey

I thank the current city council for Vision Zero successes. I am not a "transportation guy," but feel that community and neighborhood involvement is critical for making improvements.

Lewis

I have a "passion for traffic and parking" as evidenced by my service on the Traffic and Parking Board. I want to ensure that all roads serve all users, regardless of mode. Funding needs to be a priority in the budget. It took 2 years to fix certain dangerous intersections and problem areas and there was currently an 18-month backlog on sidewalk repair.

McPike

I want more bike lanes in general and more protected bike lanes. Sidewalk quality varies considerably throughout the city; uneven sidewalks negatively impact residents' ability to safely walk.

O'Connell

I want to move parking spaces back from intersections to improve visibility. We need more bus stops where people live, to make road improvements to slow down cars, and to add traffic-enforcement cameras. We need to improve pedestrian-scale lighting at night.

3. In 2023 city council proposed a grant program to help small business owners of color. This was blocked by a lawsuit. What would you propose to help business owners of color who were disproportionately affected during the pandemic?

O'Connell

I propose that we focus on childcare and transit as "targeted universalism" to lighten common burdens. I want the city to start/invest in incubator programs. More or improved support for business associations would be helpful.

McPike

City Council should work to achieve the goals of the grant program through different means, as the target is essentially to help undercapitalized businesses gain access to money.

Lewis

We should ask for local governments to be allowed to preference local businesses and one of our state legislative priorities. The Federal government can do so, and we should ensure that this preference is allowed. Investing in local chambers of commerce would help. Spending 2 years of income on rent is a cash flow problem for a small business.

Huskey

With the former arena deal, our current City Council was betting on big businesses and billionaires. Instead we should support small businesses, especially those owned by people of color. I propose that we devise a system of set-asides for small retailers.

Harris

I like to emphasize the importance of investment over charity, and mindset of investment over charity when addressing this issue. We need to strengthen Alexandria minority business associations. It is important to hear from minority small business owners, to collect data, and improve metrics.

Gaskins

We need to create more opportunities to access capital for small business owners. While on council, I funded a disparity study.

Chapman

We need to create ways for small businesses to access capital, to provide funding, and do things to help small businesses with marketing services. I'd like to create more supports for small business owners of color

Bagley

I'd like to create an advisory group on the same model as the Youth Safety and Resilience Program, gathering small business owners to ask about their needs. This would be better than taking advice from big business experts and trying to apply that to small businesses.

Aguirre

It is important to collect metrics to find out about the actual problems experienced by Alexandria small businesses. A program to do this is in process; I helped get a Spanish-speaking community member involved.

4. Alexandria is seeing a larger number of our children being sent to the juvenile detention center, including those with substance abuse and mental health issues. How can the city use an alternative approach to serve these children?

Aguirre

I am proud of getting dedicated funding to schools for mental health care while on council.

Bagley

The [Alexandria Co-Response Program \(ACORP\)](#) is a positive success. We need to have mental health counselors available in recreation centers and sports leagues. These are environments where youth feel comfortable and this will encourage them to consult counselors.

Chapman

Young people in our community do not feel connected to adults. Improved after school programs can help, perhaps in coordination with the Department of Health. Our youth need to feel safe and respected.

Gaskins

We need to have mental health spaces in recreation centers. We need to increase mental health staffing and support.

Harris

After school programs are important for the prevention of these problems. I'd like to work to engage with youth and increase youth participation on the juvenile justice board.

Huskey

Our youth are struggling. This is a resource problem. We should increase rapid-response staff. I would personally step back and let experts lead.

Lewis

There are many mental health challenges in our community. Resources needed to be available for parents as well. We should be careful to avoid criminalizing behavior. We should put more resources towards city opioid treatment programs.

McPike

We need to expand existing programs such as [ACORP](#) in particular. We need to expand mental health and substance abuse programs. These are health issues, not criminal issues

O'Connell

Young people need spaces that are safe, and they need hope for their future. This means support for opportunities, including university studies, community college, and learning trades.

Yes/No Questions

Candidates were allowed to respond by holding up yes/no signs only. Clarification given: if candidates have any qualifying remarks, i.e. "yes, but...", candidates are to answer "no."

	1. Vouchers	2. Housing Tax	3. Free DASH	4. ARISE	5. School board	6. Youth program	7. Mobile crisis	8. Sheriff/ ICE
Aguirre	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N*	Y
Bagley	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N
Chapman	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N
Gaskins	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N
Harris	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Huskey	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y
Lewis	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
McPike	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N
O'Connell	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

*For this question, Aguirre shrugged his shoulders instead of holding up a sign

1. Are you willing to fund and implement a local rent voucher program?
2. Currently, Alexandria's dedicated affordable housing funding is 11.6 million dollars per year. That comes from the "penny tax" and the meals tax. Are you willing to dedicate an additional 2 cents of the real estate tax rate, generating an additional 9.4 million dollars, to deeply-affordable "working class" housing?
3. In September 2021, Alexandria eliminated fare collection on all DASH buses. This generated record ridership. Do you support continuing fare free DASH service?
4. Are you willing to expand funding for the ARISE guaranteed income pilot program?
5. In your view, does the city council have a role in holding the school board accountable in delivering promised results?
6. If you are elected, are you willing to commit more money towards after-school programs and workforce development for youth?
7. Do you support creating a mobile crisis unit in the health department to replace the crisis response team program directed by the police department?

8. Are you willing to leverage the city council budget to encourage the Alexandria Sheriff's Office to eliminate their voluntary cooperation with the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, also known as ICE?