



2015 Seattle City Council Affordable Housing & Homelessness Candidate Questionnaire Responses

Mike O'Brien City Council Position 6

There is unmet need for affordable homes in Seattle. The 2015 One Night Count found 2,813 people surviving outdoors within city limits after the shelters were filled. Of all Seattle households 15-20% pay more than half their income for housing costs. This number includes 62% of those with the lowest incomes.

1. If elected, what will you do ensure everyone in Seattle has the opportunity to live in a safe, healthy, affordable home?

I have been championing an affordable housing linkage fee and will continue to do so until we have sufficient tools to meet the housing needs of all of our residents and workers.

People of color are disproportionately challenged by access to affordable homes. In Seattle, 52% of White households own their home, compared with just 29% of Black households and 27% of Latino households, according to 2010 Census data cited by the Mayor's office. According to the National Equity Atlas [<http://nationalequityatlas.org/node/7156>], in the Seattle area, people of color are more likely than Whites to be paying more than they can afford, whether they own or rent. Displacement and gentrification are pressing concerns as more low-income people, disproportionately people of color, are forced to move outside the city into areas with fewer opportunities.

2. What is the city's role in addressing these disparities?

The city plays a critical role in addressing racial disparities in housing within the city which can then lead to disproportionate displacement for communities of color. The city is developing tools as part of our comprehensive plan update to help evaluate risk of displacement in different neighborhoods throughout the city. I am optimistic that these tools will help us address these disparities.
(<http://seattle.legistar.com/View.ashx?M=F&ID=3730180&GUID=5B5B0267-84B9-4D07-B8FA-584DB7EF4FF2>)

Currently only 30 affordable homes are available for every 100 very low-income households in need of housing in Seattle (2015 Washington State Housing Needs Assessment [<http://1.usa.gov/17BlyKr>]). Rapid growth in Seattle is causing an even greater need for more affordable housing, according to the Seattle Affordable Housing Nexus Study [<http://bit.ly/1Rrug1n>] commissioned by the City Council.

3. Do you support an inclusionary housing policy that goes beyond voluntary incentive zoning and requires that development contribute to affordable homes?

Yes

I will continue to work to pass a linkage fee (<http://www.seattle.gov/council/issues/affordablehousing/linkagefee.html>) and other inclusionary housing programs.

Housing costs in Seattle are outpacing incomes. According to data collected by the Mayor's office, at the average wage for their profession, a medical assistant living and working in Seattle cannot afford the average 1-bedroom apartment. An elementary school teacher cannot afford the average 2-bedroom apartment. The situation is not improving on its own: gross median rents in Seattle have increased more sharply than in any other large city in the U.S. in recent years (Seattle Times, 9-18-2014 [<http://bit.ly/1zPZidy>]).

4. Do you support asking the state legislature to remove the state ban on rent regulation?

Yes

I fully support removing the ban. The city needs more tools to help people stay in the housing they already have. I am undecided on the specifics of how we would proceed with various forms of rent stabilization, but the city council should have a robust public discussion about those policies. If there is not support in the legislature to completely remove the ban on rent regulation, I am open to approaching the legislature with specific proposals that Seattle intends to create and request they to revise the law to allow our specific proposals to be implemented.

The Seattle City Council recently passed an ordinance authorizing encampments in certain areas for people experiencing homelessness. An amendment called for studying the impacts of allowing encampments in residential areas.

5. Should encampments for people experiencing homelessness be allowed in residential areas?

Yes

I think we should have all options available for us to meet the needs of unsheltered people.

People experiencing homelessness often face local regulations making it difficult simply to exist. Seattle has banned sitting on sidewalks in some areas during certain times of day. Brushing teeth in public restrooms was recently banned in a neighboring city. Attempts to ban “aggressive” panhandling and smoking in public parks are efforts to address public comfort and safety, but could result in targeting people experiencing homelessness.

6. How should the city balance the rights of people experiencing homelessness with the comfort and safety of all Seattle residents?

In the case where laws would have a disproportionate impact on homeless people, I would be very skeptical. Laws that, in effect, criminalize people experiencing homelessness will have a hard time gaining my support.

According to Zillow, more than a quarter of Seattle’s “low-end homes” (those valued in the bottom third of home values for their market) are underwater. These homes tend to be occupied by low-income and fixed-income homeowners or renters.

7. Do you support a mortgage premium reduction plan to address foreclosures in Seattle?

Yes

8. Please suggest other strategies to prevent low-income people from losing their homes that you would support as a city council member:

There are a host of possible strategies for preventing foreclosure on homes that are underwater, such as premium reduction plans and "voluntary" condemnation of mortgages. The tools we have been exploring are complex legally and there are not great examples of programs working in other jurisdictions, but we need to continue to work to address this challenge for low-income and fixed-income homeowners facing the threat of foreclosure.