

AIA Minneapolis 2021 City Council Questions

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Sustainable Design/Resiliency

The building sector accounts for nearly half of carbon dioxide emissions in the United States per year – more than any other sector. U.S. buildings alone are responsible for more CO2 emissions annually than those of any other country except China. Most of these emissions come from the combustion of fossil fuels to provide heating, cooling, and lighting, and to power appliances and electrical equipment.

I have responded on similar topics here:

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/k0e4o6hq3ckwq8x/2021%2009%2022%20Community%20Power%20questionnaire%202021.pdf?dl=0>.

I claim no special expertise on energy topics but will respond to the best of my ability.

How will you work with architects and the city to prepare Minneapolis for the impacts of climate change?

Political leaders, like litigation attorneys (my career to date) are generalists that have to draw on a wide array of specific expertise. As with any other topic, I would try to recognize when a situation calls for specialized expertise, and seek it out – while never forgetting that the expertise is a guide but not a dictate. I recognize the urgency of minimizing carbon emissions and am very sympathetic to conservation and mitigation measures.

How will you incentivize approaches to design, construction, and operations to move these goals forward?

I have no specific plan but will be alert to the issues and opportunities. I have a closely related wish to take up the real estate and banking professions on their expressed desire to correct the effects of past redlining and racial covenants – by identifying the descendants of locally excluded persons and assisting them to become homeowners in integrated neighborhoods throughout the city.

Development/Affordable Housing

Investment and development efforts in Minneapolis have historically been uneven and have led to both prosperity and displacement. As a member of the City Council, what specific solutions do you have to foster development and affordable housing that serves the multifaceted needs of Minneapolis businesses and residents? To what extent are public-private partnerships or taxpayer-supported development part of the solution?

In a metro area that exceeds 3.4 million residents, I respectfully decline to view affordable housing as a Minneapolis-only issue. Minneapolis has a population density significantly higher than St. Paul and drastically higher than the metro area as a whole. I regard home ownership as the most effective safeguard against gentrification and other economic trends that threaten the interests of low income homeowners. I also regard greater racial integration of homeownership neighborhoods in the city as a high priority issue.

But here is some repetition of [other questionnaire responses](#) I have made.

The new triplex and unrelated occupant changes – if tied to owner occupancy – present opportunities for affordable home ownership. But rezoning for multiple housing units (“upzoning”) is [more likely to increase](#) than to decrease housing costs for modestly sized¹ projects. In addition to the cost of producing new housing units, upzoning is likely to result in a bidding war for bulldozable properties.

As of now, visions of duplexes and triplexes throughout the city are the nocturnal sugarplums of well-heeled developers. But that does not have to be the outcome. Instead, if the city were to require owner occupancy of at least one unit in each of these new buildings – and of properties housing unrelated persons – it would make a major stride toward affordable home ownership. It also would preserve neighborhoods. Neighbors should not have to call distant landlords when issues arise on the block.

One may also surmise that prices are set at the margins; therefore, unless we can achieve supply that overwhelms demand, prices will continue to rise.

Equity in the Built Environment

We see wide disparities in access to quality housing, access to spaces to work and play, and access to the process that creates and designs these places in the City of Minneapolis. How would you address these as a member of the Council?

Many of these issues fall to related governmental entities. For example, the Park Board has primary jurisdiction over open spaces, the school board over education, and the Metro Council over transit access. We should work with all of them to maximize these goals, and make those factors we do control- such as streets and public safety - as conducive as possible to the pursuit of equity.

Post-COVID Downtown Core

¹ *I gave this a more detailed review, here:*
<https://www.dropbox.com/s/69rzxr57ovrgmpa/2021%2009%2012%20Addendum%20to%20my%20critique%20of%20Minneapolis%202040%20zoning%20overlays.pdf?dl=0>

The COVID pandemic has drastically changed the way people live, work, and play. Even though the situation is still quite fluid, what changes do you expect to see in the downtown core and beyond?

I spent 20 years of my career (1994-2013) 47+ stories above the ground in downtown Minneapolis offices. I still maintain a downtown mailing address and make frequent trips there. I agree that the pandemic has drastically changed the look and feel of downtown. But I anticipate a slow but robust (pardon the Rumsfeldian term) recovery, which may also address housing issues as [redundant commercial space is converted to housing](#).

2040 Plan Implementation

The Minneapolis 2040 Plan is already having broad and deep impacts on the City's built environment. What will you do as a City Council member to ensure that the goals of the plan are met? Where do you see the greatest opportunity to address inequities? What are your priorities in implementation?

My main 2040 concerns regard its new zoning overlays. My comments below are a repetition of [a critique I have previously posted](#). That critique contains additional supporting detail.

These questions loom as the Minneapolis 2040 zoning changes move forward.

2040 zoning proponents wield the rhetorical cudgel of long departed, explicit methods of racial exclusion. So, why is there nothing in the zoning plan that promotes racial equity?

2040 zoning proponents intone the mantra of affordable housing. So, why are they promoting policies that are [likely to increase](#) housing costs?

2040 zoning proponents appear to recognize the community-building benefits of home ownership by persons of color. Or maybe they don't. But if they do, why are they marking thousands of Minneapolis homes for destruction, particularly in lower income parts of the city?

2040 zoning proponents try to dress themselves in the green garments of climate warriors. So, why are they promoting policies that would push aspiring homeowners out to more distant locations in the metropolitan area?

Before I go into detail on the goals versus the policies, there are two broad historical observations that explain what is happening. First, major social upheaval often results not from the volcanic eruption of an underprivileged class of people, but from civil war among the privileged. Some would say among the "elites," although I hold that to be a semantically incorrect use of the word "elite." But the megahistorian Peter Turchin uses the word, citing ["elite overproduction"](#) as a root cause of our current conflicts, and of

many throughout human history. Second, another megahistorian, Thomas Piketty, also uses it. He offers a deadly accurate [assessment](#) of why Western working classes have abandoned the so-called “progressive” parties, and conservative parties have adopted a misdirected populism. Since 1980 and well into the last decade, the political competition was between the educated Brahmin elites who have taken over the social democratic parties, and the merchant elites who still held sway in the conservative parties, leaving the working classes with no constructive alternative.

Succinctly put, the proposed Minneapolis 2040 zoning changes have little to do with any of their stated goals or supporting rhetoric. Rather, they represent an assertion of power by a new Brahmin generation of urban planners – a generally newer group of the privileged challenging a generally older one. Yes, the planners can cite years of focus groups and carefully directed community engagement. So can the Coca Cola company.

In [November 2018](#), a former Minneapolis planner asserted that, “The 2040 plan is a radical social engineering experiment without a shred of empirical data to support its shifting goals.” 33 months later we still lack the shred, let alone the quantum of scientific data (to use a progressive buzz phrase) that would justify the upheaval.

Additional Questions

How would you work with architects to realize your vision for Minneapolis?

My vision is a city that preserves its neighborhoods while gradually evolving toward additional higher density commercial and residential districts – particularly in existing commercial areas and on old streetcar junction corners. I will be looking for architectural ideas that respect the history, blend with existing characteristics, and point the way toward future adjacent development.

And what can we as architects do to work with the city of Minneapolis to move your vision forward?

My previous answer defines my vision of our mutual effort.