

2025 Madison Common Council Candidate Questionnaire

The first section of the questionnaire is for your basic contact information and campaign media

Candidate Full Name *

Sean O'Brien

Aldermanic District *

16

Home Address *

[Redacted]

Email Address *

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Phone *

[Redacted]

Campaign website (if applicable)

www.seanformadison.com

Social media (Facebook, X [formerly Twitter], etc.) accounts, if any

<https://www.facebook.com/people/Sean-For-Madison/61569028298013/>,

<https://www.instagram.com/seanformadison>

Questionnaire - Part 2

Please state your position on the following issues.

Please limit answers to 500 words (approx. 3,500 characters). Any answers exceeding the word count limit will be redacted after 3,500 characters.

If you have completed this questionnaire before, you may skip any question that is not starred (**) unless you would like to modify or update an answer submitted in a prior year. If a question is skipped, we will re-post the most recent submitted answer in its place.

1. Why are you seeking this office?

I am running for Madison Common Council because our city is at a crossroads. We have a lot of challenges and opportunities on the horizon, and I believe it's time for new leadership that will move our city forward.

I have lived in Madison my entire life. I am an Eagle Scout and a proud product of our city's public schools. After graduating from Edgewood College, I bought my first home in District 16. I've seen Madison grow and change over the past 26 years. I know what our city has to offer, but I also know that it is not working nor affordable for all residents.

I currently work as the Policy and Advocacy Director for Fair Wisconsin, our state's only LGBTQ+ civil rights and political advocacy organization. I've worked with stakeholders at every level of government to advance policies that uplift our communities and have built strong relationships with elected officials, organizations, and community leaders across the state. I also serve on the Richmond Hill Condo Association Board.

My time in civil rights advocacy and local leadership have taught me how to listen, lead, and advocate for others – especially the most marginalized. All of these experiences motivated me to run for council, and I believe the skills I've gained along the way prepare me to be an effective alder for District 16.

On the council, I am ready to work with anyone in order to get things done. I want to give back to the community that raised me and fight for my neighbors. I look forward to rolling up my sleeves and tackling the tough issues facing Madison, from affordability and public safety to transportation, infrastructure, and protecting our environment.

2. What in your background or experiences qualifies you to understand the unique needs facing small businesses?

My very first job was as a dishwasher at the Chocolaterian Café on the east side, eventually working my way up to being the manager. At the Chocolaterian, I gained a deep respect for small businesses and the role they play in our communities – lessons that I still carry with me to this day.

Growing up, I was taught the value of hard work and what it means to show up for your neighbors. As an Eagle Scout in Troop 34, I learned lifelong financial skills and participated in service projects to improve the quality of life in Greater Madison. My father is a carpenter and has worked for several small businesses throughout my life. He is currently the owner of a small drafting business, and I help him with technology and promotional work.

Now, as the Policy and Advocacy Director for Fair Wisconsin, I oversee our organization's policy portfolio to advance LGBTQ+ equality in Wisconsin. I engage with partners across the LGBTQ+ civil rights movement and business community, including the Wisconsin LGBT Chamber of Commerce, Out Professional Engagement Network (OPEN), and LGBTQ+ owned businesses across the state.

As a civil rights leader who has worked with every level of government to get things done, I will be a strong, effective advocate for the economic interests of District 16 and Madison as a whole.

3. What are the most important issues facing businesses in your district?

District 16 is home to large commercial & Industrial areas and offices, and much of our growth over the past several years has been industrial. I believe that many of the issues facing businesses are the same issues facing our entire city.

Affordability – particularly as it relates to workforce housing – is an enormous challenge in Madison. If residents cannot afford to enter the housing market or stay in their homes, we risk displacing entire segments of our city, disrupting Madison’s social fabric, and stifling economic growth. I’m committed to finding ways to reduce the cost of living in Madison so that our population growth can be managed sustainably and people continue to choose Madison as a place to visit, live, and raise a family.

Another issue facing businesses is public transit options and connectivity. As we write the Southeast Area Development Plan, we need to be smart about investing in more transportation infrastructure that connects the far east side to the rest of Madison’s economic landscape – including downtown.

In District 16, I often hear from residents and business owners that they feel ignored by the city. If elected, one of my top priorities will be to increase communication and collaboration between businesses and the city government. I want to be an alder that business leaders can trust, communicate openly with, and feel confident calling on for help.

Coming out of a global pandemic, many businesses are still feeling the impact of labor and supply chain shortages. I believe we need to invest in small business grants, provide more support for new and emerging entrepreneurs, and incentivize new development through credits such as TIF/TID.

I look forward to working closely with the Greater Madison Chamber of Commerce to deepen my understanding of the unique needs of Madison businesses and develop solutions to our city’s greatest economic challenges.

4. How do you define economic development? Please elaborate.

I define economic development as the uplifting of communities. When businesses of all sizes do well, when city services are strong and well-funded, and when living is affordable, our entire city benefits. Economic policies that do not uplift low-income and working families are not sound economic policies.

My vision for economic growth is one in which our small businesses are supported through robust grants, development is strategically encouraged, and entrepreneurship is accessible to all – including the most marginalized members of our community. I believe our city needs to grow its commitment to supporting small business owners and creating as many avenues for growth as possible.

But aside from supporting business owners and employers, our city needs to help attract new residents and customers for these businesses. By making Madison more affordable, diversifying our housing stock, expanding transit options, and ensuring reliable city services for all, we can provide for a diverse population that will in turn support our businesses.

5. How can Madison best attract and retain a diverse workforce?

As Wisconsin's fastest growing city, Madison is facing so many unique opportunities and challenges. We need to ensure that Madison's population growth is managed sustainably and we are planning ahead in order to maintain a high quality of life.

This is a broad challenge that requires broad solutions. Nearly every element of our city, from infrastructure and public transit to social services and housing stock, are directly tied to whether people view Madison as a desirable place to live and work. To continue attracting a diverse workforce, I am committed to doing everything I can to lower the cost of living and increase the availability of affordable workforce housing. I want to make sure that new development is strategically placed near fast and reliable public transit, job opportunities, retail options, and city services. I am also committed to investing more in career training, supporting small businesses, and reaching young people through after-school programs and the trades.

As a member of Gen Z, I'm particularly interested in working to attract and retain young professionals in a variety of industries. I want to work closely with the University of Wisconsin, MATC, Edgewood, and other colleges and universities in the greater Dane County area to keep more graduates here in Madison instead of losing them to larger cities like Chicago.

But in addition to these policy priorities, we also need to ensure that Madison has a strong sense of community, diversity, and belonging. Meeting the social and emotional needs of our city's residents has a profound impact on whether they will ultimately choose to move here, stay here, or start their families here. As an alder, I want to do everything in my power to protect the rights, freedoms, and livelihoods of our most marginalized residents – including immigrants and the LGBTQ+ community. Madison must continue to be a national leader in standing up for our progressive values and welcoming everyone to our city.

****6. How would you characterize Madison's current workforce housing landscape? What strategies would you recommend for the city to meet the diverse needs of workforce housing?**

I am deeply concerned with Madison's current housing landscape. Everyone deserves access to safe, secure, and affordable housing. No one, regardless of their age or income, should be pushed out of Madison due to the cost of living. But today, young people who are trying to enter the housing market and seniors who are living on a fixed income are being priced out. As a young person who recently bought my first home, I understand the financial squeezing that is happening across our city.

We must use every tool at our disposal to address the affordable housing crisis, end homelessness, and ensure that no one is displaced in our community. We need to make sure that people moving to Madison can afford to enter the housing market, and people who currently own housing can stay in their homes.

As an alder, I will support policies to increase and diversify Madison's housing stock. I will encourage mixed-use developments that include housing units and businesses and invest in our city's affordable housing fund. I am committed to finding new ways to incentivize developers to build more affordable housing where it is suitable, including through tax increment financing (TIF).

We must be intentional with how and where we build new housing units in order to avoid the challenges posed by food and healthcare deserts, absentee landlords, and a lack of access to transit, green spaces, and city services. I see the city's Southeast Area Development Plan as a fantastic opportunity to shape the future for a large portion of District 16 and involve our neighborhoods in envisioning that future.

****7. How do you view Madison's continued population growth? What are the opportunities and challenges that come with it?**

I am thrilled by Madison's population growth. It is a clear sign that we are a strong, vibrant, and desirable community. That being said, we need to better address the challenges created by rapid population growth – including the rising cost of living, housing burdens, and strain on city services – if we want to truly enjoy the benefits of that growth.

We need sustainable options for future funding that do not cut services or further raise the cost of living. These goals are not mutually exclusive. Madison is being starved of financial resources from the state – a situation that will force us to continuously face the question of whether to raise property taxes or cut essential services. I am committed to leveraging my existing relationships with state legislators to help secure a fairer shared revenue deal for Madison and put us on a stronger fiscal path moving forward.

We cannot simply examine these issues in the short-term. We must consider what projects and policies will look like five, ten, and even twenty years from now as Madison continues to grow. The benefits of population growth are exciting, but we must manage this growth well.

****8. What is your assessment of Madison's transportation system? What priority improvements are needed to support mobility for a growing workforce?**

I have been encouraged by the recent growth of Madison's transportation system, but I believe our public transit options need to be made more accessible and equitable for all Madisonians – not just those living near existing transportation corridors. As Madison's population and workforce continue to grow, we need to be intentional with how we accomplish this. I often hear from residents of District 16 that they feel left out of Madison's transit expansion and aren't seeing the benefits of new infrastructure.

I believe we must continue investing in public transportation to ensure that all Madisonians can travel to their workplaces, return home, and patronize businesses in every corner of the city. If elected, I will advocate for continued funding to expand Bus Rapid Transit (BRT), fight to bring passenger rail to Madison, and call for the creation of a Regional Transit Authority to increase coordination with other municipalities. We also need to be smart about how we are building new parking lots downtown and across Madison to save space and avoid congestion.

But mobility extends beyond motor vehicles, and we should not only be thinking about cars, buses, and trains when we imagine our city's future. Madison is already one of the most bike-friendly cities in America. As an alder, I want to continue to invest in bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure that is modern and safe, including sheltered bike paths and cross signals. I will support policies to expand and secure funding for Vision Zero to eliminate traffic-related deaths by 2030. My hope is that we can make Madison even more walkable and pedestrian-friendly as we enter the next decade.

****9. With declining aid and rising costs, local leaders must find creative ways to be more efficient. Some examples include merging services or operational reforms. Please identify ways the City of Madison government can potentially be more efficient.**

Improving government efficiency and transparency will be one of my top priorities in office. Madison does not exist in a vacuum. As our city continues to grow, we must increase our collaboration and partnerships with neighboring municipalities. Working with cities like Sun Prairie, villages like McFarland, and small towns like Blooming Grove will allow us to expand popular services and reduce the cost of new projects. The creation of a Regional Transit Authority for Dane County is something I am particularly passionate about, and I will lobby to end the state preemption that currently prevents us from doing this.

I am open to learning more and exploring other ways to cut costs and boost efficiency within city hall, including merging certain departments and services with the county government. I will examine each of these proposals through a lens of equity and always consider who will be most impacted by such changes. I do not believe we should be cutting essential services to our residents in the name of efficiency.

**If offered an endorsement from the Greater Madison Chamber of Commerce, would you accept it? *

Yes

No

**By submitting this candidate questionnaire, you agree that the Greater Madison Chamber of Commerce may publish it with the intent of sharing it with its membership and the general public. *

I acknowledge the Chamber will publish my answers to this questionnaire.

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