

# Madison Council Candidate Questionnaire

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

Candidate Full Name \*

Jael Currie

Aldermanic District \*

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Home Address \*

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Email Address \*

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Phone \*

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Campaign website (if applicable)

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Social Media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) accounts, if any

<https://www.facebook.com/FriendsofJael>

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## 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 seeking re election to continue building upon the work that's been accomplished during my first term and the knowledge I've acquired in order to assist in making productive change. Together, we've put a 9th ambulance into service, expanded mental health response and service through the CARES program, invested in supportive services and housing options for the unhoused, affordable rental housing and home ownership initiatives, committed to improving transportation equity and choice, and provided a guaranteed income for 155 low income households. And yet, we still have a lot of work to do! We must commit to ensuring all Madisonians have their basic needs met while keeping up with housing demand, services and other amenities as our city grows. We must also revisit and redefine our priorities as we continue to establish "new norms," in the COVID 19 pandemic era. I am still striving to bring the concerns of ordinary people to Madison's Common Council through the perspectives of my lived and professional experiences while also highlighting opportunities the city and its officials can take to address societal injustices and disparities plaguing our community. I am also seeking to expand my leadership within the Common Council and continue building coalitions to bring people together around positive and productive solutions to problems we are all aware of. I am committed to, and invested in, serving the community I've lived my entire life, as well as advancing progressive policies that move Madison forward.

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

I was born and raised in Madison and have dedicated my career to providing resources to meet human and social needs. In my current role as YWCA Madison's Housing Director, I manage a department of 9 housing and/or housing-related programs, 12 full-time staff members, and an annual budget of \$2.6 million. This experience has provided me with opportunities to hone my leadership skills, particularly in the areas of staff and team development, as well as inspiring staff to meet grant outcome goals while simultaneously assisting clients through many taxing barriers and challenges. This experience has also compelled me to become a better listener and be open to adapting operations, hours, and any other thoughts/expectations regarding staff and/or program performance. My ability to provide leadership and guidance to multiple programs and staff, keep a team informed about changes that impact them, clients and operations, as well as the ability to activate effective listening skills qualifies me to understand the unique needs facing small businesses.

As alder, I've taken advantage of numerous opportunities to meet with local business owners, tour their facilities and hear about their successes, challenges and needs. These interactions have not only introduced me to amazing people doing amazing work in our community, but it's also allowed me to get an eyes-on, hands-on perspective of the impacts of public policy on local businesses and their operations. I've brought aspiring and established business owners and city staff together to work through questions and challenges that have arisen during planning and assessment phases. District 16 has experienced significant industrial growth and development the past 2 years, which has naturally enhanced my knowledge and understanding of zoning, planning, economic and community development policies and procedures. This experience has also helped me understand methods that can help produce growth and development, such as TIF (Tax Incremental Financing). Being appointed to the city's Plan Commission has also afforded me the opportunity to expand my knowledge and understanding of processes businesses and/or developments are required to go through to achieve approval, and a network of experts I can rely upon when I have questions or need help. Furthermore, my nonprofit background has aided in my understanding of unique challenges the community faces, especially as Madison has one of the highest nonprofits per capita, in the United States. This includes applying creative solutions and advocacy for equity amid budgetary and funding opportunities and challenges. Lastly, being connected to and supported by the Greater Madison Chamber of Commerce has also served as a helpful tool during my first term. I know I can count on David Aguayo, the Chamber's Head of Public Policy and Advocacy to provide perspectives on both positive and unintended impacts public policy has on local businesses and their owners, as well as making suggestions that mitigate risks.

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

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic is still presenting considerable challenges to businesses. Generating revenue, being able to afford and retain staff, and the ability/eligibility to receive forms of federal/state/municipal supported economic assistance are still some of the most important issues facing businesses. Over the past 2 years inflation has severely limited the availability of materials, while the cost for materials continues to skyrocket.

Several businesses, particularly in the restaurant and entertainment industries have been forced to close for long periods of time, operate at severely reduced staff and consumer capacities, and/or shut down completely. Other businesses have been operating in full (and sometimes exceeded) capacity to keep up with supply and demand. Newly established businesses are taking necessary risks by creating and/or increasing marketing and advertising without the guarantees of yielding more business.

I will continue to listen to the concerns of the Greater Madison Chamber of Commerce and its members as part of working toward solution-focused outcomes to retain businesses on the far east side and throughout Madison.

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

I define economic development as growth in economic activity through private and public investment. The most desirable economic development enhances the general quality of life by providing goods and services that are needed, along with employment opportunities that allow people to support themselves and their families while promoting public health by protecting natural resources. Beneficial economic development serves the public interest by strengthening public capital, uplifting standards of living for all, and supporting improvements in education, social welfare, diverse cultural amenities, and democratic institutions.

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5. What is your perception of Madison's business brand? How do you think Madison is perceived locally and nationally?

Madison has a lot of passionate driven business owners and opportunities for growth in the business sector. It provides tremendous opportunities to co-work with like-minded individuals and entities, collaborate to create innovative start-ups, and give back. For instance, Madison is in the Top 5 in software publishing job concentration and developer salaries, while still being 2 percent below the national average for cost of living. It's also among the Top 10 best cities for young entrepreneurs and has the highest concentration of Millennial talent in the country. It's a Top 15 global city in access to venture capital per capita because of its connectivity. This should be no surprise given Madison is the state's capital, is home to the state's flagship university, offers a multitude of beautiful parks and lakes, and is highly devoted to philanthropic efforts and activism. Opportunities to work within government and nationally acclaimed institutions, businesses, and systems, receive education from a top-ranked university, enjoy green spaces, and raise a family are often listed as appeals to live and work within the city. Simultaneously, Madison is among the nation's worst for its racial disparities across multiple sectors, including inequitable opportunities and access to starting and owning a business and/or property. Nationally, Madison continues to be in the limelight as a welcoming, liberal and/or progressive, and inclusive city. Locally, however, disenfranchised individuals and communities of color have been bringing attention to these disparities for decades along with desperate calls to stop the talk and move into action. Depending on which Madison residents one speaks with, one could collect an anthology of the tale of multiple Madisons. If you do not possess and/or inherit capital, privilege, or power, in addition to having lighter/fairer skin, Madison is likely not a city in which you feel the ability to thrive and belong.

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

Madison cannot continue to lean solely on the amenities listed above to attract a strong workforce. Retention needs to be specifically focused on keeping employees who represent and bring forth diverse identities, perspectives, abilities, and cultures. Madison must continue working towards ensuring both work and personal environments, especially for those representing diverse perspectives and backgrounds, are available, welcoming and inclusive. This can be achieved by intentional incorporation of best (workplace) practices, such as the use of employee resource groups to foster diverse and inclusive coalitions aligned with organizational values and goals. Promoting and supporting the creation/expansion of diverse business owners and businesses such as grocery stores, barber shops and hair salons and entertainment venues adds relevance and richness for all. The city could also serve as a powerful model of reform within the field of Human Resources by adopting fair hiring policies such as “banning the box.” Statistical and anecdotal evidence illustrate that ban the box policies help dismantle the structural discrimination faced by people with records in the employment market. Moreover, fair hiring policies benefit our communities in the form of increased tax revenue and public safety. Attracting and retaining a diverse workforce must also include a focus on youth and young adults as they prepare to enter their careers. Introducing young people to career pathways through internships, apprenticeships and career training initiatives before they finish their secondary education has aided recruitment and retention efforts, while also building up homegrown talent. These types of opportunities should also be expanded to adults and individuals who have historically struggled with unemployment and under-employment.

Wage equity is also paramount to this topic. Significant wage gaps still exist between men and women and worsen when considering race, work sectors and education. The Council passed a resolution that delivered a wage increase and parity for general city employees who do not have collective bargaining rights in the approved 2023 budget. We must continue to remain competitive in the employment market while also being mindful of growing costs and limitations in revenue.

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## 7 What strategies would you recommend for the city to meet the diverse needs of workforce housing?

We need to continue developing housing of all types, with an emphasis on keeping housing costs affordable. Special attention and innovation needs to be applied to ensure that extremely low-income households, those experiencing homelessness, students and senior citizens will not continue to be priced out of housing opportunities. Madison's shortage of affordable housing intersects with many social and community issues. Therefore, the city's housing strategy needs to be multi-faceted and intimately linked with policies promoting transportation, education, environmental justice, public health, public safety, and job creation. This strategy also needs to include funding priorities like the city continuing to invest in creating housing opportunities through its affordable housing fund and other available tax credits. For example, the city recently awarded up to \$4.1 million from its affordable housing fund to help finance the development of affordable housing, housing services - such as repair and rehabilitation efforts - and financial literacy and homebuyer education.

While zoning is a necessary part of development, the city also needs to continue to evaluate the impact of its zoning policies and update practices that are more in line with the social and economic needs of our community. A recent example of this was the passing of Transit Oriented Development (TOD) overlay zoning, which moves away from exclusionary zoning and encourages higher density infill development, while also modifying zoning near transit corridors. The intended result is providing opportunities for residents to live closer to work, drive less and remain closer to schools and community centers.

Ensuring that we move toward lowering eviction rates and eradicating generational poverty is also key. Both my personal and professional experience with housing policy and its outcomes gives me a unique understanding of the issue. I'll continue to press for strong collaborative efforts between the city, county, state, and non-governmental organizations. We will work together toward ending homelessness in our community and make it possible for everyone to afford secure, dignified housing.

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**\*\*8** In what ways can city government support entrepreneurs of color working to start and grow an emerging business in Madison?

This is an urgent task, especially considering the city's need to attract and retain a diverse workforce, meet the diverse needs of workforce housing and encourage growth in economic activity. This nation's wealth - and its wealth disparities - are built on a foundation of labor extracted from enslaved Black people. The intergenerational poverty that ensued has never been adequately addressed. In fact, it has been exacerbated by institutional racism. Taking action - such as financial investments and creation of new policy that supports entrepreneurs of color seeking to start and grow a business in Madison is necessary in repairing harms that government entities and its policies have upheld for decades. The city has adopted an affirmative action plan and requires similar efforts from firms with which it does business. The city must continue to encourage and incentivize the private sector to invest in entrepreneurs of color in order to further expand upon positive impacts the city is already making.

Madison has established Target Business Enterprise (TBE) programs to ensure small, minority and women business enterprises maximize their opportunity to compete for city contracting and procurement opportunities. Additionally, the Commercial Ownership Assistance Program was created to help Black, BIPOC and women business owners purchase commercial property their businesses are located in. The city has also demonstrated commitment through its investments in the development of the Black Business Hub, Madison's premiere enterprise center devoted to incubating, accelerating and networking Black entrepreneurs. The city has also invested in the development of the Center for Black Excellence and Culture which will serve as a collective of Black brilliance to affirm, inspire and advance the Black community in Madison. During the 2023 budget process, the Common Council put forth additional funding needed to ensure Madison's Public Market - a business incubator and accelerator with a strong focus on BIPOC owned businesses - will be available to support local business, create jobs and generate revenue come 2025. The city needs to continue deepening its engagement, partnership and opportunities to collaborate with locally and state run Black, Latino and Hmong Chamber of Commerce's and their members. This engagement will not only inform the city of steps it can take to center the voices and perspectives of entrepreneurs of color, but also improve economic opportunities in Black and BIPOC low-income and underserved communities.

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**\*\*9. What is your assessment of Madison's transportation system? What priority improvements are needed to support mobility for a growing workforce?**

I remember when the Metro system operated routes by letters - the J route was the one I knew to catch to get home. A couple decades later, Metro has already undergone changes and will soon implement a redesign of the network in June of this year. While I know concerns were brought up and haven't been 100% mitigated during the latest redesign development, I am hopeful changes to the current system will pale in comparison to the benefits of having more frequent and direct access to the city via public transportation. Furthermore, the city is also addressing environmental and quality of life issues by continuing to make investments to replace (typically diesel) fleet vehicles with electric fleet vehicles, which includes the buses that will be part of the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system. Transit Demand Management (TDM) is another exciting venture that promotes alternatives to single occupant vehicle use by shifting travel to sustainable options such as transit, biking, rideshare and walking. TDM strategies also implement a fixed amount of roadway capacity and are key factors in reducing emissions associated with climate change.

I am also encouraged by the intention of ensuring reliable and frequent bus service is implemented along corridors with housing density, or the ability to create more density along these corridors, through Transit Oriented Development (TOD) Overlay Zoning. I also share great excitement at the possibility of passenger rail service coming to Madison, as the city is currently undergoing a rail study to determine feasibility. We must also continue to evaluate ways to make transit more cost accessible to extremely low income residents as well as expanding locations where reduced fare passes can be acquired. Being a vehicle owner or being able to rely on bicycle transportation to get to and from are luxuries that are not accessible to all Madisonians. We need to continue to keep in mind those whose primary transportation option is public transit, and ensure that access to buy groceries, get children to school and run errands are as accessible and friendly as they are to those who can choose to use transit as an option.

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**\*\*10. A challenge that often comes with growth are issues impacting crime and safety. Some of these challenges are real; others perceived. In either case, it impacts livability and our ability to recruit and retain talent to Madison. Do you view Madison as a safe community and what is the Common Council's role in building safe communities?**

I have spent my entire 35 years living in Madison. My parents are both Madison transplants who came to the city to seek higher education at UW-Madison. Coming from crime ridden and economically depressed neighborhoods on the south side of Chicago and Portland Parish Jamaica, they were intentional about raising my brother and I in Madison due to the safety and opportunities they recognized the city could provide us. While the Madison I know today is vastly different from the 1990's Madison I grew up in, I consider Madison to be a safe community, especially in terms of crime. While I agree that one shot fired, one homicide committed, one vehicle theft (etcetera) is one too many, it is unrealistic to think Madison will be a crime free utopia based on its population, vibrant growth and continued challenges to ensure basic needs of all Madisonians are met. I believe we can alleviate conditions that foster crime by addressing inadequate and inequitable access to housing, health care, education and employment opportunities. I believe the Common Council's role in building safe communities is to make informed decisions based upon data and trends and feedback from the city's residents.

In my first term of office, I worked collaboratively to improve public safety, including one of my top goals – getting the city's 9th ambulance in service to shave precious minutes off the time it takes for residents to receive life-saving emergency medical care. We also started and expanded the CARES program, which improves the safety and security of people experiencing mental health crises, and their families. Gun violence is a public health issue, therefore, I am supportive of promoting and enhancing the efforts of the Violence Prevention Coalition, a collaborative initiative led by Public Health Madison Dane County. But more can be done. We need to continue to address people's real concerns about safety and security as well as the long-overlooked cries for greater transparency, accountability, and justice in law enforcement and criminal justice practices. Disparities in law enforcement and criminal justice practices continue to point at long-standing failures to end systemic racism linked to the legacies of slavery and abusive structures of power - namely policing and incarceration. Despite extensive calls for reforms to these systems and reducing overreliance on policing, police budgets have not shrunk. In Madison, our actions demonstrate a continued reliance on MPD to apply prevention and community oriented approaches, while still maintaining the power to detain and arrest. We need community leaders who speak the truth, which is: ever-increasing spending on police services is not making us safer. Over-reliance on reactive policing has backfired by sapping resources that can and should be used to address the conditions that cause crime.

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

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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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