

City/Town Council Candidate Survey

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What is your name? *

Patrick Lawler

Are you running for City or Town Council? *

Bloomington City Council ▼

What are your top three priorities if you are elected to the (Bloomington City/ Normal Town) council? *

Covid Relief & Recovery: We have a lot of work to do on this front. The pandemic is still in full-swing and mass vaccinations are going to take a long-time to roll out. We have to help working families and small businesses get through the coming months. We also need to make sure that health mandates are followed and that we react responsibly to local spikes in COVID. It's essential that we build off the successful programs that we put into place last Spring and Summer to keep people afloat and put us in a better position for long-term recovery.

Safe, affordable housing: I was really saddened a few years ago when an apartment building in Ward 5 burned down on Gettysburg Drive. And then I became further upset when I read that inspectors flagged that building for over 200 violations just a few months before it caught on fire. The violations covered everything from problems with smoke detectors, windows that wouldn't open, and structural issues. We have to hold property owners to a higher degree of accountability to make sure that apartment and rental properties don't fall into disrepair, placing the lives of tenants in jeopardy. We also need to change the fact that we only hire 2 residential building code inspectors for a city of over 80,000 people. It's unacceptable and we have to hire more rental inspectors. I'll talk about increasing the number of affordable housing units and addressing homelessness in the next question.

Public Safety beyond policing: When it comes to public safety, we have to take a people-first approach rather than just assume that more policing is always the answer. That means that we need leaders who seek out constituents to ask them what they need to feel safe. Because, ultimately, we are the experts of the neighborhoods in which we live. For instance, I've talked to people who live behind Stevenson Elementary that have said having better lighting in their neighborhood would make them feel safer. And a recent study from the University of Chicago in 2019 showed that increasing lighting actually does make people safer by reducing crime up to 33%. Additionally, making sure that people have access to mental health services increases public safety, and we need to pass a meaningful Welcoming City Ordinance so that everyone, regardless of their immigration status, feels safe interacting with emergency responders and city staff. Crime shouldn't go unreported because people are afraid that calling the police will place themselves or their family members in jeopardy.

In your opinion, what is the largest strength of (Bloomington/Normal), and how would you promote it? Conversely, what is the greatest challenge (Bloomington/Normal) faces not withstanding COVID-19 and how will you address it? *

When I think of what gives our community resiliency and strength, my mind immediately gravitates towards all of the amazing non-profit organizations that we have serving people around our community. As a teacher, I've had a firsthand look into how those organizations lift up and support working families throughout Bloomington-Normal. From Project Oz, the YWCA, PATH, MarcFirst, the Immigration Project, the Community Healthcare Clinic, Black Lives Matter and so many more, we're really fortunate to be overflowing with groups serving those at the margins, giving voice to those without power, and working to alleviate problems associated with poverty. As a city, I really think we need to continue to build those partnerships and support those nonprofit organizations in the work that they do. Additionally, we need to work hard to identify the unmet needs of people in our community so that we can work to set up systems to address those problems as well.

In terms of our greatest challenge, I have a really hard time elevating one issue above the others and, in all honesty, they are all tied to COVID in one way or another. But one issue that has loomed large on my mind is housing in our community. We have 700 families waiting for section 8 housing and over 200 families that are currently homeless. And with the lack of adequate federal or state aid in response to COVID, I fear that we're in for a wave of evictions due to the financial stress COVID has placed on struggling families in our community. In the short term, I'd like to see us use some of the 3 million we received from the CARES Act as well as our reserves to extend the direct aid available to families trying to pay rent and utilities. Long term, I'd like for us to consider an intergovernmental task force where both cities partner with nonprofit organizations like PATH to tackle homelessness and establish a rapid re-housing program. Dealing with chronic homelessness means that we need to first get people housed instead of setting burdensome preconditions that act as barriers to entry. Once people are housed, then we can provide them with the supportive services to help empower residents and prevent a return to homelessness. A great model we could use is Mercy Housing Lakefront Chicago. To increase the number of affordable housing developments, we can also continue to attach Project Based Vouchers to newly constructed or rehabilitated units. These vouchers can guarantee financial stability for the future of those developments, and when used in conjunction with Low Income Housing Tax credits, can provide a powerful incentive for developers to increase the affordable housing stock in Bloomington. The Lincoln Lofts on Four Seasons Road is a great example of this approach that can be replicated elsewhere in our community. These public-private partnerships are the future of affordable housing. Addressing this challenge would also benefit Chamber members- especially those in downtown- as having a large population of people without homes adversely impacts businesses.

If elected to the (Bloomington City/Normal Town) Council, how would you work with (the opposite community) to enhance and ensure collaboration? *

I realize that the relationship between the two municipal governments has been tense at times, but I think that the key is to identify areas of common interest and then focusing on solutions to those shared concerns. We've done that with Connect Transit and with the Economic Development Council. In mentioning the rapid rehousing program earlier, I see that as the type of program that could be developed between the two municipalities and local nonprofits like PATH. In particular, I think that bringing non-profits into those collaborative spaces is important as those groups have important experience working with community members to address key issues, and they also bring a much-needed people-oriented perspective to the table. And having them guide those processes ensures that the issue being dealt with stays centered in the debate rather than differences or disagreements between municipal governments.

Also, as a teacher I've learned you don't always have to reinvent the wheel. We can look to other regions that have a similar set-up to see what works and hasn't worked for them in terms of collaboration. For instance we could look to the East to see how Champaign, Urbana, and Champaign County have worked together for the benefit of the people that live there. We could also look to the West to see how Peoria, East Peoria, Peoria Heights, and Peoria County have collaborated on important issues.

Finally, the lack of coordination between our school districts, universities, municipal governments, and the County health department has been very frustrating at times during this pandemic. I realize that we're in unprecedented territory, but going forward we have to establish a better system for emergency coordination between these different units of government. For instance, I would have loved guidance from the County Health Department in best practices to set up my classroom for in-person learning and better coordination with them for the contract tracing that has been in place since we returned to in-person learning. Both city councils should be involved in this coordination as well. We all have to be on the same page in emergency situations.

How do you plan on making yourself available to not only your immediate constituents but to community groups and leaders, organizations, non-profits, etc.? *

Community engagement is incredibly important, but it needs to be done correctly. I say that because, when it's done poorly, it erodes any sense of investment and trust that constituents have in their local government. People stop engaging when they feel that the surveys they fill out and the input they take the time to provide is met by indifferent leaders. That's not okay. It's why I think that elected leaders need to have a direct presence in the neighborhoods that they represent. And I'll be honest, when I announced my campaign back in June, there were some parts of the Ward I hadn't spent any time in. So, when I collected petition signatures to get on the ballot, I walked down every street in the Ward, and most importantly, took the time to get to know the people who signed my petition and lived in those neighborhoods. I made sure I got outside of my social bubble and my neighborhood to meet people where they were at. And I've done my best since then to stay in touch with those people and expand my networks in every corner of the Ward. Because you can't represent people if you haven't taken the time to get to know them first. And while I know it's not realistic to assume I'll develop a relationship with everyone in the Ward, I do want to have enough of a presence that most people know who I am and would feel comfortable reaching out to me. If I become the alderperson for Ward 5 and we get the pandemic under control, I'd also like to set up public meetings on a regular basis to get to talk to constituents and see what's going on in their lives and on their streets. I'd rotate those meetings through different neighborhoods each time.

In regards to community groups and other leaders, I've also been intentional about developing relationships with them as well. The first person I set up a meeting with after I announced my candidacy was Police Chief Donath. And I followed that up by reaching out to non-profits like the YWCA and MarcFirst to learn more about the services they provide and the struggles that they're having. I've also spoken with current members of the City Council as well as both members of the County Board for District 7, in which Ward 5 is located. Those relationships are important to build, and I'm always open to learning from the experiences of others.

And in terms of governing, I think that it's very important that Council members partner with community organizations and nonprofits when advancing and voting on initiatives. For instance, a few years back, a very diverse array of organizations formed a coalition to call for Bloomington City Council to pass a Welcoming City Ordinance. In particular, I remember the Immigration Project coming out in strong support for that ordinance. When organizations serving the constituencies impacted by a potential measure come out strongly one way or another, elected leaders need to listen and realize that, ultimately, we in this community know what we need. I'm excited to bring that people-centered approach with me to City Council in making this community work better for everyone who lives here. It's worked for me as a teacher, and I've seen classrooms full of students become tight-knit communities when I give students a hand in shaping the classroom environment. I know I don't have all the answers, whether as a future alderperson or as a teacher trying to navigate students through this pandemic, and we have to be willing to partner with and learn from those we're serving if we want the best possible outcome.

What are the top three (3) small business needs/issues and how would you support local business sustainability, growth, and opportunity? *

To begin with, I think that we need to maintain a highly adaptable, well-trained workforce. This means that everyone needs to have access to affordable training to fill the diverse array of jobs that we have in our community. At the high school level, we're really fortunate to have the Bloomington Area Career Center for students to start exploring different vocations and trades that they might want to enter upon graduating. We also have multiple 4-year colleges in the community and an amazing Community College with a Workforce Development Center that helps set up adults for jobs in nursing, technology, construction, and a variety of other high-demand fields. We need to continue to invest in these institutions and work to expand the opportunities and programs they offer so that they are accessible to everyone that lives in Bloomington-Normal. Another key aspect of this issue is maintaining that workforce once they've been trained. This requires us to continue to build Bloomington-Normal into the type of place where young people want to settle down and call home. We have to be responsive to the types of things that they are looking for in a community.

A second need is to make sure we're doing everything we can to assist local aspiring business owners get their business off the ground. That requires us, as a City, to continue to financially support organizations like the Small Business Development Center (SBDC) which provides no-cost consulting to help fledgling businesses develop a workable business plan, come up with a marketing strategy, and get the financing that they need. So many of the unique, fun businesses that our family loves to visit- Grove Street Bakery, the Olive Bin, Donny B's, and the Coffee Hound- have received help along the way from the SBDC. I really believe that those types of locally-owned start-ups are what make our community special and give us the type of character that make people want to live here. Continuing to support new start-ups is essential to keep our local economy vibrant moving forward. I also was glad to read that the SBDC recently reached out to hire a bilingual advisor to be able to better serve and assist Immigrant-owned businesses. And when we, as a community, talk about affirming black lives, I think that one of the tangible ways we can demonstrate that value is through making sure that organizations like the SBDC are intentional about focusing on increasing the number of minority-owned businesses and making sure that they are getting the capital they need to get off the ground and have success. Working class BIPOC folks are much less likely to have the connections and established relationships with lenders that give advantage to more affluent, white entrepreneurs. The SBDC, and organizations like it, need to play a role in helping to level that playing field.

A third major issue would be COVID relief. I think we need to acknowledge the good work that Bloomington has done in dealing with this pandemic. We moved unemployment from a high of 15% back in April down to 3.9% by October. During that time, we also did a pretty good job of keeping down community spread despite being a fairly populous city. How'd we do that? Local schools and major employers were very proactive from the outset, going remote before most surrounding areas. We also put a mask mandate into place and were ahead-of-the-curve in getting direct aid to people and small businesses. Almost \$900,000 in Community Development Block Grant funds have been divided between helping small businesses shoulder costs and helping residents with paying mortgages, utilities, healthcare expenses, and childcare. We've put people first, and it helped us weather the storm last year. Going forward, we need to continue to expand the programs that our community has come to rely upon in this pandemic. We received over \$3,000,000 in a reimbursement from the CARES Act that we put into our general fund, and with the recent rise of COVID in our community, I think we need to responsibly reinvest at least some of that money back into the populace like we did last Spring. In regards to using a portion of those funds for small businesses, I'd like for the city to consider zero interest loans and focus additional grants on small businesses that have been particularly

devastated by the pandemic- such as restaurants, bars, and entertainment venues. We've seen too many of those establishments close their doors in recent months. I'd also like to see the City be more selective in how this grant money is distributed. We should focus on businesses that put the health of the community first by following state and local health mandates over businesses that openly flaunted those measures to make a quick buck and endanger the community in the process. In providing this additional aid, I want us to continue to make sure we really target the smallest, hardest-hit businesses in our City.

How should local government play a role in economic development and diversification of the local economy? *

In terms of economic development, the first, and likely most controversial items that come to most peoples' minds are Enterprise Zones (and the financial incentives they entail) and tax increment financing. I do think those tools exist for legitimate reasons, but I also think they should be used sparingly and with great caution. In regards to TIFs, which strip much-needed funding away from schools for 20 to 30 years, if possible I would rather explore shorter term tax abatements that require developers to meet benchmarks to maintain those incentives. It provides greater accountability for the public and doesn't tie the hands of school districts long-term. Revitalizing out-dated and dilapidated business districts is important, but we can't sacrifice the quality of public education to do so.

With the Enterprise Zone that we have, I see it primarily as a tool to help revitalize neighborhoods that have had little private or public investment in recent years. I'm largely thinking of downtown Bloomington and the Market Street corridor. In expanding it to encompass other potential areas of the community, I really think we need to ask ourselves if businesses would have expanded their operations and set up shop there without the incentives. We don't want to give away tax money unnecessarily. We also need to weigh the number of potential jobs created by an expansion of the economic zone against the lost revenue. So, while there are some unique opportunities that could have a large pay-off and help diversify our local economy that we should absolutely consider expanding our Enterprise Zone for, I think we need to primarily use it to help lift up parts of our community that have faced divestment and are having a hard time attracting private capital. We need to put people first and make sure that economic development doesn't only serve those who are already doing well in our community.

A final thing I'd say in using economic development tools is that, generally speaking, I think we need to prioritize local businesses that are rooted in the community when we use these tools. Larger corporations might come here if given a sweet enough deal, but unless they become integrated into our community, those companies and the jobs they bring will likely leave when the incentives expire or they get a better deal elsewhere. I also want to make sure that those incentives aren't giving larger companies and chains a competitive advantage, albeit likely an unintentional one, over locally owned and operated businesses. When we help local businesses grow, those jobs are likely to stay here long-term, making our community more resilient and better suited to weather economic hardships.

How do you plan to overcome difficulties presented to the municipality by the unstable financial situation in the State of Illinois? *

To begin with, I think that we need to be financially responsible. This means being very cautious in using TIFs and extending the Enterprise Zone so to make sure that we have enough money for our schools and other services. We can also pursue progressive revenue streams that keep the burden off of low-income families while bringing more money into the City. A vacancy tax would be one such idea that we could pursue, which would also help revitalize parts of the community while bringing in more revenue.

Additionally, we should celebrate the amazing job done by City Staff to maximize the amount of federal and state COVID-related grants that the City has received over the past year. We need to continue to support that important work to make sure we don't leave money on the table. I think that Connect Transit has also done an excellent job on that front by pulling in over 18 million dollars of grant money over the past year. It has helped the City save money and build up our reserves.

And finally, we need to prioritize our current infrastructure instead of looking towards new expensive developments far outside of our City core. For instance, the city invested around 11 million dollars in expanding sewer and water lines to the Grove Neighborhood on the far Southeast side of the City. The property taxes trickling in from that development likely won't come close to covering that initial cost before more money needs to be invested in maintaining that infrastructure. Obviously, we can't undo what has already been created, but we need to be more careful about making sure future developments are more economically sustainable for the community. I'd like to see the city ask developers to shoulder more of the costs for projects that are taking place outside of the City core and our preexisting infrastructure.

Are there any municipal services you feel are missing from the (Town of Normal/ City of Bloomington) and need to be added? Alternatively, are there any that you view as non-essential and could be eliminated to cut costs? *

I don't think there are municipal services that are missing. I'd like to see more trash receptacles in downtown Bloomington as part of our revitalization of that area. And as I've outlined in earlier questions, I feel that we can improve upon many of the services that we provide. We need to invest more in building code enforcement and hire more rental inspectors to ensure that rental housing units are safe. I'd also like to see the city invest more into the work being done by social service providers and non-profits in our community to help address chronic homelessness, a lack of access to healthcare, and the need for childcare services among low-income families.

I also can't think of any municipal services that I would like to see eliminated. I think we can cut spending on some of our services, like policing for example. We currently spend around 20 million, or one-fifth, of our budget on policing. It's a tool communities use to manage problems related to poverty, but it doesn't do anything to solve those underlying problems themselves. And not only does it not address those problems, but it also creates problems as blacks folks disproportionately find themselves being searched, detained, and on the receiving end of force. Overpolicing is problematic and it's inherently a reactive, rather than a proactive, approach to community improvement. If we invest in support for struggling folks in Bloomington, as I outlined in the earlier paragraph, then we can make our community healthier and safer, and we will have less of a need to invest as much in policing. It's a better path forward. And if we can also strengthen the Civil Review Board and do more to ensure police accountability in our community, then we can build trust between law enforcement and the people they are tasked with serving, which will reduce lawsuits related to improper police conduct, which have been costly to the City in the past.

The McLean County Chamber of Commerce works with the Political Action Committee to help its membership understand who you are as a candidate and what your policies will be if elected. We achieve this by sharing your responses with the membership to help increase the turnout of educated voters. I agree that the McLean County Chamber of Commerce may share and publish my responses as submitted and as presented, on the McLean County Chamber of Commerce website www.mcleancochamber.org. *

Yes

No

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