

# Dane County Democratic Party Candidate Questionnaire

Ayomi Obuseh  
District 8 Alder  
ayomi4alder.vote

## **Professional Experience:**

Volunteer Coordinator for the Tom Palzewicz Congressional Campaign, Legislative Intern for 2 years at the Wisconsin State Capitol, Research Assistant in the UW-Madison Law Department, participant in the Dane County Youth Government Program, and member of the Superintendent's Student Advisory Group.

## **Political/Service Experience:**

Executive Director of Impact Demand, a youth-led grassroots organization based in Madison; Phone banked with Freedom Inc.; Organized with Urban Triage and Freedom Inc

## **Why Are You Running In This Election?**

At first, politics in many ways seemed out of reach because you needed connections and tons of financial support. As I have grown into a youth activist, I now understand that politics is more than just those barriers and slowly I was able to see more and more leaders expand my imagination of what politics would look like, AOC and Ayanna Pressley, for example. I realized that everything is political and it is important to understand a system that we are a part of and do our part, big or small, to make this democracy work. Policy and politics are two different things and it was hard to be in a space when we would advocate for progressive policies and politics would get in the way. So now, I am running to be Alder of

District 8 because I want to transfer the energy I saw from organizing in the streets to an office to accomplish even more. I first moved to Madison during 2016, which was a scary time for any immigrant family. It became clear to me immediately that Madison is not the liberal bubble that it claims to be. Those in power were not and continue to not listen to the BIPOC and marginalized voices who are directly affected by legislation. I am running with my community with their full support, and I cannot wait to tackle police reform, affordable housing, environmental justice, and other social justice issues. When elected I plan to become a bridge for UW Madison and the youth in the city and advocate for a green, equitable future as well as bring a sense of urgency to council.

As a Black, immigrant woman, I am able to see the intersectionality of the issues that affect these different communities. This summer we saw a spark of hope that was brought with the protests and it spread like wildfire. Running for office is the American Dream, and I am proud and honored to run for office with the full support of the community in order to address issues we've been facing for years. It's time to amplify our voice and empower others with passion and a plan.

### **What Are The Three Most Important Issues In Your Race?**

My three top priorities are racial justice, environmental justice, and education reform. As a community organizer I see firsthand how these issues affect every aspect of my community, and I am confident in my plan to begin addressing and remedying some of these issues. To start, achieving racial equity will need a multifaceted and holistic approach, and I plan to implement reform in terms of policing, affordable housing, food sustainability, accessible transportation, and general community investment. For police reform, I want to take our overinflated police budget and

redistribute those funds into our community. One area I want our city to invest in is bringing the community control program of CAHOOTS to Madison, which consists of EMTs and social workers responding to emergency calls rather than police officers. I also want to remove lethal weapons from traffic stop officers, implement explicit and consistent mental health and de-escalation training, as well as having punitive consequences after fatal shootings, in accordance with Travis Washington's "Hands Up Act". Furthermore, I plan to increase transparency by ensuring public access to police history as well as complaints, hosting town halls so that the community can stay updated and have a space to voice concerns, and holding space for press conferences when police accountability comes into question. I have a history of working with nonprofits and advocating to establish the Civilian Oversight Board, and I would continue work towards guaranteeing the Ad Hoc recommendations are being heard. I recognize that healthy communities don't call 911 and I would want to establish a committee to compile data around 911 calls so we can establish areas in which our community needs more support.

In terms of environmental justice, watching politicians continue to make incremental changes to counteract climate change while still supporting the corporations that exacerbate the problem has lit a flame of urgency within me. I intend to ensure transparency about how PFAs have been affecting residents and what must be done to address their harm on the environment and onto us. I want to use my position as Alder to help ban F-35s, as these fighter jets have no place in Madison due to the way it degrades neighborhood quality due to the air, water, and land pollution they bring. Other facets of my plan involve investing in solar energy, electric energy, and other technology such as footfall paths to produce renewable energy, as well as converting the excess algae

blooms from our lakes into biofuel that can be used in place of methane for a greener, more viable fuel source. To achieve the goals set by the Green New Deal, I plan to work with groups like the Sunrise Movement and Youth Climate Action Team and continue to educate my constituents about the intersectionality of environmental and racial justice. While we mitigate the effects of climate change I think it is just as important to look into sustainable building practices with developers and I will continue to work with my local neighborhood association CANA to continue to develop buildings which are sustainable but also keep the characteristic of the neighborhood. As we continue to push for green politics my role as an alder of district 8, a mostly campus area, is to continue to inform and prioritize youth and write policies rooted in the community which is why we are also pushing to have a teen center not only created downtown but run on green energy and have plans to create an urban farm to teach people about compost, zero waste and an ability to provide healthier food options to those in need.

Education has always been a vital component of my life, and my educators are the ones that gave me the confidence to run for office. I envision a Madison in which youth and teachers are prioritized and integrated into our conversation of having a green and diverse future. This looks like providing accessible, electric buses for transportation, expanding access to affordable and quality WIFI, and ensuring that youth and their families have secure housing, healthy food and access to affordable or free healthcare so that they can focus on learning rather than surviving. I plan to implement a scholarship that invests in youth of color who wish to become teachers and establish a "Grow Your Own" Mentorship program that prioritizes teacher diversity and creates a support group which would increase the retention rate for BIPOC educators within the district. This idea is something I started advocating for at the age of 17 while attending Madison

West High School and I have already talked to multiple schools, such as UW Milwaukee as well as Edgewood College, who supported the idea. We are also in conversation about implementing more night school classes for those who work a 9-5 job.

Ultimately, the work I plan to accomplish involves the community at every level while establishing deep rooted relationships between the city and the residents that continue after my term.

### **What Are The Largest Environmental Concerns You Aim To Deal With In Office?**

Our campaign is rooted in environmental justice, and I would support and advocate for any legislation and projects that increase sustainability with a holistic approach. I have signed the Green New Deal and Fossil Fuel Pledge to take a strong stance on climate change and with increased accountability for the companies which contribute towards polluting our environment. The priority issues that Madison is facing is flood prevention, water pollution by PFAs, and shifting towards 100% renewable energy by 2030 and Zero Carbon Emissions by 2050. Updating our response and prevention to flooding in Madison is one of my top priorities as well as maintaining the Yahara Watershed. We must also work at full transparency with our neighborhoods about the harmful chemicals they are exposed to with PFAs and F-35s and how they affect our water quality; we must also work on a county and city wide level to solve this. I also want to work with the MMSD to be responsive to DNR requests for testing for PFAs contamination. There must be immediate actions from the city rectifying these harms to keep our communities safe and clean to live in. Moving towards 100% renewable energy means working with MG&E on updating our electric grid while divesting from fossil fuel usage and the companies that support it. We can also improve public

transit by implementing electric buses as well as beginning free bus routes with an eye for a universally free and fully funded electric Madison metro. Increased bike barns, bubblers, and keeping electric car charging stations in mind within development projects are also plans I hope to implement. Furthermore, I plan on advocating for footfall paths as well as other novel ideas such as converting algae blooms to biofuel to use untapped areas to better our lives. Ultimately, the city needs to fully invest in our community's health and safety and actively work towards making sustainable change.

### **How Will You Use Your Position To Create More Equitable Opportunities And Help Those Living In Poverty?**

Poverty is a particularly pressing issue considering the limited means of public assistance due to the pandemic. Many public assistance programs (such as nonprofits, schools, etc.), have decreased their ability to do programming towards their intended populations, which increases the risk of experiencing poverty and homelessness for the communities that rely on these interventions. I personally am advocating for increased ways to retain residents of Madison and enable them to thrive in the city. This means job retention, increasing land and home ownership, encouraging knowledge and control over their food sources, and more. I would support funding towards citywide job fairs to attract and expand networks to diverse communities, particularly BIPOC and low income communities. More community members must be in spaces to discuss equity, diversity, and inclusion and educating constituents about the benefits of these practices. Right now, there is a low retention rate for diverse workers due to insufficient emotional support systems. I plan to work closely with nonprofits like the Urban League to create healthier work environments and better retention. Meanwhile, I also plan on working with the Urban League and YWCA Madison to increase

home ownership among BIPOC, and establishing microlending programs for all interested in home ownership with the city. I believe in housing first initiatives to provide a sense of stability for jobs/school. I was on the ground to help build tiny houses and want to promote creative, and functional living spaces. As an Alder, I plan on increasing affordable housing units in the city but especially within my district as we have many students especially international and immigrant students. Investing in youth and families is a priority of mine, and one of the main projects that I plan on working on with MMSD is more curriculum on food and healthy living; I want to work on establishing community gardens and cooking programs in schools. I also plan on working with the city and nonprofits such as Rooted to expand urban farming in Madison in order to increase job opportunities as well as fresh, local produce.

### **How Do We Address Racial Inequality?**

To address racial inequality, we have to confront and change the systems made to profit off of oppression and exploitation. I have worked, and plan to continue working on, integrating the 2019 Ad Hoc Committee Recommendations into Madison's emergency response system. My plan to implement the CAHOOTS program, a program that will serve as an unarmed alternative to the police, will not only result in the increased protection for BIPOC and a decrease in state sanctioned assault, but less emissions of tear gas, pepper spray, and other harmful toxins. Environmental justice plays a large role in physical and mental health which in turn is connected to the long term wellbeing of the community. I also plan to make land plots for urban farming more readily accessible for BIPOC, which will increase food sustainability and lessen food waste, and home ownership. As a community organizer, I helped organize drives for clothes and reproductive products to help the homeless. As an Alder, I plan to work with the city on economic

justice and equity, which includes affordable housing and ownership over land and food, which is particularly significant among BIPOC communities. I also plan on working with the city to increase Targeted Business Enterprise Programs and Tax Increment Funds for small businesses and housing developers. I also plan to work with the Madison Metropolitan School District on the retention of teachers of color and plan on working with the district to integrate more sustainability practices into the schools and their curriculum. As a graduate of MMSD that often talks with current students and school administrators, I am aware that we can and should do much better for our students and youth of color; youth empowerment has always been my priority. Hence, the teen center I plan to advocate for not only will give youth political education about environmental and social justice issues but will deliberately be constructed to be run on clean energy, and the youth will have a large hand in the implementation of this center. By keeping an intersectional lens through these initiatives, among many other plans I plan to implement with the power of Alder, I plan to make the Madison community more informed and unified so that they can better demand action from the city towards what the residents actually need.

**How will you promote restorative justice and address abusive and racist practices by the police force?**

Madison's Police Department needs to be held fully accountable for its impact on reinforcing the system of oppression that it is meant to uphold. This should be done by empowering the Police Civilian Oversight Board, which is meant to be the voice of the community. The Common Council can keep the Civilian Oversight Board fully accountable to the public, who advocated for years for the board to be formed in the first place, by crafting

recommendations with the original intent of the board in mind, ensuring public input in selecting the Independent Monitor, and making sure the public is included in the Board's decisions. The 177 Ad Hoc recommendations call for increased transparency and accountability for MPD, and I know the Board and Common Council can work together to reimagine public safety and end the harm policing has done to BIPOC communities and I plan on joining committees to continue that effort. Certain issues on the platform such as the removal of the cash bail system current jail continues are projects which involve Dane County to move forward. We must all do our part in building coalitions so that when elected we can continue to prioritise the needs of our constituents and work within our jurisdictions to create more politically inclusive policies. Ensuring that these are done and can be maintained is restorative justice and is a path to a transformative approach to our public safety system.

**Due to the ongoing economic impact of Coronavirus, many local governments are expecting unprecedented budget shortfalls. What would you prioritize in the budget? Where would you make cuts?**

As an Alder, one of my priorities is putting the city through an independent audit so that we have a clear picture of where our funds are going and where to cut it. I do not find it reasonable that so few alders are known to have a clear understanding of the capital and operating budget. So, I believe that it is vital that we go through an independent audit to clearly comprehend exactly how our funds are being used instead of it being broadly under a category in a budget report. This is the first step to making the budget more efficient. I also fully intend to establish a CAHOOTS program in Madison, which is a model from Oregon which streamlines a city's emergency services by dedicating more services and redirecting funding towards mental health

emergencies. This model saves Eugene, Oregon \$8.5 million annually in public safety spending. I would also prioritize small businesses and families to ensure that they are able to continue despite the economic fallout that the pandemic has caused with city microlending programs along with other citywide interventions. That being said, my priority is putting people first, so I plan to work with my fellow alders to make sure that our community comes out of the pandemic with the best footing possible in partnership with local nonprofits and encourage the use of CDIF funding for new projects.

**How have you elevated diverse voices in government and public discourse? How would you continue to do so if elected to this office?**

My campaign and professional life is dedicated to amplifying marginalized voices into the public forum. It is important to not only say that I am listening, but to demonstrate that as well by being consistently present. I am an activist before I am a politician, and coming in with a perspective of years of community organizing, I know how to effectively bring in various perspectives to the table with an intersectional lens that ensures that they are involved with every part of the process. With my internship experience at both the city council and the state capitol, I understand that there are state statutes that impede on municipal power and how to overcome these limitations. In order to elevate diverse voices to government and public discourse, I highly encourage the use of social media as a way to connect to my constituents and those who have a stake in these issues. I use my platforms to inform people about city policies that are on the city council's agenda and encourage them to speak in support or opposition to the item; I similarly promote university issues and encourage everyone to civically engage in debating policies and programming. For the campaign specifically, we have live streams

with other community members or representatives to inform the public and allow accessible input. I plan to continue hosting virtual town halls and open forums during my time in office to keep my constituents updated and connected with resources. The biggest role of an alder is fostering relationships and building community and coalitions and, as an organizer, this is something that I have experience with on a national level.

### **What Are The Largest Transportation Issues You Wish To Work On And How Will You Address Them?**

We need to expand access to Madison's public transportation system in order to relieve congestion and the parking crisis in the downtown area. Implementing a Bus Rapid Transit system with Madison Metro would streamline our public transit system while also moving us towards electric, zero emission mass public transit. The construction plans entail working with the neighborhoods and businesses on these streets as they build the bus corridors to ensure that they are not negatively affected by the disturbance. BRT is also expected to expand to the North and South side of the city as well as the suburbs once Phase 1 (the East-West corridor) is completed. BRT fares are anticipated to cost the same as the regular metro to fund operation and maintenance costs, but this should eventually evolve to free transit overall once the initial construction and starting costs are managed by integrating these costs into the city's operational budget for increased accessibility to public transportation. Not only do we need free buses run on green energy, but we could also do more as a city to move towards integrating electric car charging stations to prepare for the future. District 8 specifically consists of a transient student population. That being said, we need more bike barns that are accessible to the public to keep bikes protected from the elements and ensure that we encourage the use of bikes overall.

### **Any Other Issues/Topics You Wish To Discuss?**

As an alder, my strategy is to draft legislation and have it ready to be discussed by the time I get into office. During my campaign, my goal is to build relationships with those who have a vision for Madison. I am using this time to put these connections into place now so that when I have the position to put these motions in place, we have a solid foundation of informed support among the community. With the collaboration of the common council and nonprofits, we also need to have those most affected by policies at the table to ensure that they are represented and heard. Not only must the connections with the community be maintained and strengthened, I am also building relationships with current and incoming alders so that we will be a united, progressive front from Day One. With these relationships, it will be easier to draft and pass legislation that will benefit the community, and the potential for an independent audit to find the resources that would fund these initiatives increases exponentially.