

Dane County Democratic Party Candidate Questionnaire

Syed Abbas
District 12 Alder
www.syedfordistrict12.com

Professional Experience:

I work as an energy efficiency business development manager for an independent nonprofit that advances sustainability through energy consulting, continuing education, research and program design. I've worked in a variety of roles in my professional life and earned a master's degree in public policy and human development from United Nations University in the Netherlands. In addition, in April 2020, after one year of service on the City Council, my fellow alders trusted me and elected me to the leadership position of Vice President of the Madison City Council.

Political/Service Experience:

Vice President Madison City Council

Alderman District 12

Represents on Sustainable Madison Committee

Represents on Urban Design Commission

Represents on Common Council Executive Committee

Board Member - Market Leadership Advisory Board - United States Green Building Council (USGBC)

Ex Co-chair Eken Park Neighborhood Association

Ex Vice Chair Public Safety Review Committee

Ex Member of Oscar Mayer Strategic Assessment Committee

Ex Member of Task Force on Equity in Music and Entertainment

Why Are You Running In This Election?

I'm seeking office because I want to contribute to making the world a better place for future generations, including my own two little girls, by serving the public. The drive and passion for wanting to make a difference in the world has always been with me; I originally went to school for public policy and human development because of that drive.

I also want to continue the good fight I started, while serving on the City Council these past 18 months, on climate change, racial equity, social justice, and housing initiatives. I want to see an equitable Madison for our BIPOC and I want to make sure our diverse communities' voices are brought to the Common Council.

What Are The Three Most Important Issues In Your Race?

Safe Communities and Social Justice

Environmental Justice

Housing for all

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

During my time on the Council, I have continuously advocated for environmental justice, which I see as a top priority in District 12, especially because this district has a higher concentration of people of color and working-class people than most other areas in Madison. District 12 has considerable environmental concerns affecting our neighbors, including water pollution, soil contamination, and noise pollution. As an alder, have and will continue to stand strong in the fight for safe, clean neighborhoods for all.

The deployment of the F-35 fighter jets to Madison Truax Field disproportionately impacts low-income communities and people

of color. Many areas in District 12 will be impacted by the increased noise of the F-35 jets, and some areas will become “uninhabitable” per the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) sponsored by the US Air Force due to above 65 decibel noise pollution caused by the jets. I co-sponsored a resolution to oppose the F-35s, and I support continuing community-based efforts to oppose F-35s.

Unfortunately, despite working tirelessly to oppose them coming to Madison Truax Field, it seems clear that the F-35s will be coming to Madison. Thus, I am now turning my efforts to working with the community and the City, County, and State on a mitigation plan for noise mitigation for residents in the area.

In addition, the use of fire fighter spray at Truax Fire Pit has contaminated our drinking water with PFAS. During the November 2020 budget session, I sponsored a budget amendment to add \$50k for testing the water in our District and I demanded the process be expedited since this is our drinking water we are talking about. The City of Madison shares some responsibility for this contamination, and I will push to make sure we do our part to understand and inform the public of health risks, clean up the contamination, and reduce future harm.

I also proposed an amendment to add the City’s first environmental justice language into the Oscar Mayer Special Area Plan (OMSAP). The Oscar Mayer plant will be redeveloped into walkable community uses, and the 100+ years of industrial contamination must be cleaned up for this area to be safe. Due to my advocacy, the plan now includes a goal to: “Address racial justice and social equity during the OMSAP redevelopment process, which must include assessing and preventing human exposures to toxic chemicals at the site and/or released from the site among all people and particularly at-risk low-income people and people of color.”

As an alder, I kept my commitment to fight against global warming and climate change. I advocated for my constituents' voices in Council to protect the wetlands at the Hartmeyer property. Thanks to the help and support of Friends of Hartmeyer and my countless hours of hard work and dedication, we were able to save 16 acres of wetlands.

On the legislation front, in 2019, as a new alderman, I proposed a Plastic Straw Ordinance to reduce single use plastic in the City of Madison. After consulting with so many stakeholders and collecting feedback to make it more inclusive for the community, the ordinance passed.

I also introduced a game changing Electric Vehicle (EV) Ordinance to create EV infrastructure in Madison and help reduce carbon emissions. This ordinance passed at City Council on January 5th, 2021.

In the Oscar Mayer Special Area Plan, I introduced Goal 3. The focus of this goal was to “prioritize the use of green building strategies and certifications in development and redevelopment projects to achieve holistic, integrated sustainability outcomes including water resource protection, waste reduction, climate resilience, and community health promotion.”

With all new construction developments in District 12, I advocate and put pressure on the developers for green roofs, solar energy on affordable housing and promoting green building structures.

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

To help people living in poverty we need to make sure we empower our communities to have input in the budget process.

As a person of color, I personally know how hard it can be to get a seat at the table. It is the responsibility of an alder to understand his or her district and work with city staff to allocate funding or set priorities to ensure the voices of our diverse community are considered and included.

As alder of District 12 and Common Council Vice President, I prioritize communicating with, listening to, and responding to my constituents. With the input of community feedback, I used an equity lens and sponsored the following 2020 budget amendments which were approved by the Common Council.

- Allocating \$500,000 in funds for affordable housing projects
- Allocating \$3,500,000 in funds for the men's homeless shelter
- Allocating \$2,500,000 in funds for land banking to promote affordable housing
- Allocating \$45,000 in funds to create Crisis Response Team Vehicle
- Allocating \$250,000 in funds for COVID Relief Funds
- Sponsoring a grant program for Madison Downtown Safety Initiative
- Allocating \$50,000 in funds for PFAS testing
- Sponsoring \$50,000 in funds for street outreach workers

The focus of my work is to develop a people-centered budget, prioritize investing in the community and increase diverse community voices in the budget process.

How Do We Address Racial Inequality?

It has been a hard year for all of us, 2020 saw us go through unprecedented strife and brought to light a lot of problems in our society. We are living through many things, but none as profound as this new wave of a civil rights movement. It is both

heartbreaking and inspiring to see that many in our society still are fighting for equity and equality.

Wisconsin is the most segregated state in the country — the discrimination and disenfranchisement of our Black community members has continued since the time of the great Martin Luther King. We have much to go when it comes to ensuring that we bridge the educational opportunity gap, dismantle a criminal injustice system, and fix the detrimental social, political, and economic systems that are built to disenfranchise our BIPOC communities.

The heartbreaking thing is that we all see how white supremacy is used as a tool by the wealthy, the upper class, to subjugate the working class. It is indeed a white supremacist, patriarchal capitalist society and when you fight that power it fights back.

To win the fight against racial inequality we need to revamp our local and state system and need to take active steps to reduce the disproportionate impact of the criminal justice system on communities of color. We need to find alternatives to incarceration.

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

Now more than ever people in our community want to see innovative approaches to public safety. Seeing the outcries this summer about police brutality, demanding alternative public safety initiatives, I took my constituents' voices to the Council. I worked hard to research the CAHOOTS (Crisis Assistance Helping Out on the Streets) model from Eugene, Oregon, and bring it to

Madison by sponsoring a \$250K budget amendment to support the crisis response team that pairs a community paramedic with a specially trained crisis worker to focus on behavioral health emergencies. The crisis response team budget was shifted directly from the Police Academy budget line.

In addition to the above budget amendment, I advocated for hiring an Independent Police Monitor. I supported the development of the new Civilian Oversight Board.

I also worked to develop a new ordinance to oppose and completely ban chokehold measures by the police in the City of Madison, and it was unanimously approved by the Common Council.

All the above measures were inspired by the brave protests this summer as part of the Black Lives Matter movement. Amplifying the voices of protestors in policymaking has been a priority of mine since the George Floyd protests. I am so grateful for the community who pushed us to make change and I will continue to advocate for these issues on Council.

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?

In my answer to Question #2, I mentioned some of my budget amendments I have sponsored. These amendments clearly show that all my policy work is focused on investing in the community. In the past, we saw the City spend millions in construction of parking lots to support local business on East Washington Street. Moving forward, I think the City should not take on the financial responsibility of building any more parking garages and let the

developers and businesses take on this responsibility. In the next budget review, I will evaluate parking and enforcement priorities. Also, the City is looking at alternative models to policing and as mentioned above, the CAHOOTS model is one step in the right direction. To support that program, I co-sponsored a \$250K budget amendment to support the crisis response team that pairs a community paramedic with a specially trained crisis worker to focus on behavioral health emergencies. The crisis response team budget was shifted directly from the Police Academy budget line.

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

Since being elected 20 months ago, I organized over 25 in-person and virtual meetings and advocated for my constituents' voices on issues ranging from F-35 fighter jets bed-down, PFAS contamination, racial equity and public safety, housing insecurity and many others. If elected, I would continue to organize public input meetings, advocating for my constituents. I am committed to connecting with all my constituents to make sure I bring their diverse voices to the Common Council, including via in-person and virtual meetings, phone calls, social media, my city blog, emails, and mailing cards.

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

It is important for the City to have a long-term transit vision to serve a growing population. Increasing occupant capacity and running electric buses on BRT routes can improve air quality, helping Madison to reach CO2 emissions reduction goals by 2030. The BRT will also reduce traffic congestion for drivers and provide faster travel times for transit riders. My district has a lack of connectivity for potential employees and customers; BRT would

improve connectivity, attracting people and jobs to this side of the town. I see BRT as a powerful tool for economic development for our communities.

Any Other Issues/Topics You Wish To Discuss?

Another primary issue we are facing is affordable housing. On the affordable housing front, I have worked hard to bring a variety of housing types to our district and to push for long-term affordable housing options. I have shown progressive leadership in housing for District 12 by sponsoring bills to support housing affordability and pushing developers to bring affordable housing and a higher volume of housing to our district, and it has paid off with a huge number of affordable housing units coming to District 12 in just 2 years.

I supported the development of The Madisonian Apartments, a \$15 million project located at 1825 and 1837 Aberg Ave., with 70 units, including 49 for those with low incomes. This project has already received \$10 million in federal tax credits and has been approved by the Common Council.

I was also in favor of the proposed development of the Oscar Apartments, a \$25 million project at 1212 Huxley St. with 111 units, including 93 for those with low incomes. This project has already received \$15.5 million in federal tax credits.

For those facing extreme housing insecurity, I co-sponsored the bill to fund the move of the men's shelter in District 12 from Warner Park to First Street Garage to increase capacity, and the emergency bill to develop the Tiny Homes Village on Aberg Avenue to house people facing extreme conditions this winter.

In addition to these affordable housing developments, I was in

favor of three new market rate developments coming to District 12. Having a balanced approach in our district is important in order to add housing for a variety of income levels. Density is good for our small businesses as it will bring more clients to support our local economy, and the housing shortage in Madison means that we need density across the board to make sure our community can continue to afford to live here. At the same time, I collaborated with the developer of the workforce housing development at Ella's Deli to make the units more affordable.

I also sponsored a bill to add \$2.6 Million to the Capital budget for land banking to support uses in line with the Capital Improvement Plan including affordable housing.