

# Dane Dems Endorsement Questionnaire

Thank you for seeking an endorsement from the Dane County Democratic Party. You do not need to answer all of the questions below, but please answer all of the ones you feel are pertinent to your campaign. We will ask more detailed questions and followups during our interview, if we choose to have one, so feel free to answer these questions as briefly or thoroughly as you desire. These answers will be shared in full with our membership before they vote on your endorsement.

Email \*

kristenslackd19@gmail.com

Candidate name \*

Kristen Slack

Position you are running for (include municipality) \*

District 19 Alder, City of Madison

Campaign website

<https://www.kristenslack.com>

Professional Experience \*

I've been a social work professor at the UW-Madison for 23 years, where I have focused on social welfare policy analysis and program evaluation related to poverty reduction, reducing parent-related stressors, and building on family strengths. I teach courses on social policy, prevention, and my new favorite--a 1st year student course called "So, You Want to Change the World?" I am also the founder of an educational technology company that seeks to make research and other forms of scholarship more accessible to the general public.

**Political/Service Experience \***

I have never run for a political office, however I have been involved in Social Workers Vote campaigns to help get out the vote, and I have served as the Associate Director for a nonpartisan national organization that connects state legislators to policy-relevant research.

**Why are you running for this seat? \***

I don't think we are doing nearly enough when it comes to protecting and improving what makes Madison a unique and beautiful place--our local lakes, tree canopies, and green spaces. We are not like most other similarly sized cities because of our geographical features and the significance of our environmental resources to the health and wellbeing of those who live and visit here today. I am looking forward to bringing new perspectives to City leadership related to prioritizing our natural resources and fighting climate change.

I also think there is a lot of intense frustration from people all over Madison who feel left out of the decision-making loop. There is likely much agreement on the issues and goals the City is currently pursuing, just disagreement on the best way to reach those goals. As someone who has studied social problems and debated and analyzed various policy solutions for over 30 years, I have learned that the best plans come out of honest and inclusive discussion and the authentic consideration of multiple viewpoints, especially the views of those who stand to be most affected by policy. The divisive approach to problem solving on display at the City right now is no way to build a unifying vision, let alone identify solutions that will actually work. I ran for alder because I want to help change the culture on the Common Council to one that is more productive and collaborative. I believe that will lead to better decisions on behalf of our constituents and a better Madison for all who live here.

**What are the three most important issues in your race? \***

- 1) Protecting and enhancing the natural environment, consistent with our local legacy of environmental stewardship and as a means of fighting climate change;
- 2) Ensuring a mix of housing options in all city neighborhoods, including affordable pathways to homeownership.
- 3) Supporting economic growth that increases the number of living wage jobs with health care benefits.

### What are the largest environmental concerns you aim to deal with in office?

Every policy or initiative Madison government pursues should involve serious consideration of environmental impact. As Alder, I will push for that. I will bring a greater focus to carbon drawdown, an essential ingredient in efforts to reverse climate change, which in combination with efforts to reduce carbon emissions, can help speed the process of reversing climate change. We should be implementing forward-thinking stormwater management practices that prioritize protection of the local lakes and the safety of our drinking water. There are other types of environmental practices we could be exploring that have proven to be feasible here, and are widely and successfully used in other countries with similar climates. Madison is increasingly known as a center of innovation, and I want to help harness and combine that innovation spirit with a more concerted effort to protect and enhance our natural environment and harness it to reverse climate change.

### How will you use your position to create more equitable opportunities and help those living in poverty?

I have spent my whole adult life studying structural and systemic causes of social problems, particularly poverty. Creating more equitable opportunities for Madison residents involves a combination of short-term subsidies for things like housing, a vibrant nonprofit and community support network in all neighborhoods, and available funds for emergency assistance.

At the same time that we are working to support families currently struggling financially, we need to create a stronger foundation for helping families move out of poverty indefinitely. This means building a stronger economy that includes plenty of well-paying jobs, including those at the entry level, supporting local businesses and entrepreneurs, and attracting new companies to Madison. We also need to help lower income residents build equity by creating pathways to home ownership, and help residents who have had to step out of postsecondary education complete their degrees.

The City needs to look at itself, too. What fees and special taxes create disproportionate hardship for residents? What administrative burdens does the City have in place that create unnecessary hurdles for residents? If those in city government truly care about equity, then looking within city government is a good place to start.

### What will you do to address racial inequality?

Part of my answer to this question can be found in my answer to the question on creating more equitable opportunities, since long histories and the persistence of structural racism and discrimination have led to disproportionate rates of poverty among Black and brown people in this country. But when racial inequities are repeatedly found across multiple systems, including education, health care, public safety, child protection, and legal systems, the problem lies in the systems, not the individuals who use or encounter them. In a time when many politicians are working hard to prevent educators from even talking about racism and its structural and systems roots, it is even more important than ever for leaders and workers within these systems to identify inequitable rules, practices, and policies, and take the steps needed to correct them.

## How will you promote restorative justice and address racially biased policing?

First, things like violent crimes, theft, burglaries—these are examples of symptoms of larger structural problems, like unlivable wages, under-resourced education systems, unaffordable childcare, and the criminalization of poverty. Racism and discrimination exacerbate all of these societal shortcomings. We do not provide equal or sufficient opportunities for success, health, and safety in this country. If we did, the social problems we worry about most would be much less common, and the systems designed to address these problems would be much smaller.

Crime prevention is preferable to punishment after the fact. It's hard to find a person who doesn't agree with that. We need to keep expanding the prevention infrastructure in order to reduce the scope of reactionary systems. But while we take steps toward flipping the script, we need to make sure we have adequate resources and personnel for public safety. In every system there are good people who genuinely want to help others. There are also people in every system who simply shouldn't be there at all. To change or reimagine systems that we know cause disproportionate harm to people and communities of color requires those operating within these systems to see and acknowledge the flaws and be committed to ending them. This needs to be considered during recruitment and hiring stages, in training and professional development activities, in procedures for holding the police accountable when egregious situations occur, and in the creation of any new programs and practices.

We need to make sure we are collecting and analyzing data that provide insight about racial inequities in police practices, and identify procedural factors that institutionalize racial bias.

We also need to continue supporting programs like CARES and the civilian oversight board. We need to look to other countries that have figured out how to effectively address criminal activity in nonviolent ways, and invest in rehabilitative strategies like restorative justice, education and job training.

## How will you improve the public health of our community in your position?

A primary concern for me is restoring our lakes to a healthy state. I want the City to ensure that the lakes are safe to swim in and that the fish we catch are safe to eat. There is also plenty of research on the benefits of green spaces and natural environments on mental health. This has been given relatively less consideration in recent years. Efforts to improve the safety of our drinking water need to be intensified and solutions need to address root causes of the problem. The SaltWise initiative and efforts to eliminate PFAS from our water sources are critical steps forward, but managing stormwater differently and creating more infrastructure for groundwater absorption to reduce urban runoff is equally essential.

We are also in the midst of a mental health crisis, severely exacerbated by the pandemic. I hear and see glaring signs of this at the university in the accounts from faculty and staff and more directly in the students I teach. We have barely begun to scratch the surface in terms of addressing this problem. Crisis mental health care is a particularly critical need, as is access to psychiatric care for children and youth and both outpatient and inpatient care for all ages. We don't have even a fraction of the capacity covered for addressing the mental and behavioral health needs of city residents. Community mental health centers, a larger and more diverse mental health workforce, substance abuse treatment, and tele-health options all have a role to play.

Managing the ongoing pandemic is, of course, also essential. We need to be prepared for resurgences in Covid-19, as well as for similar public health threats in the future.

What are the largest transportation issues you wish to work on and how will you address them?

I believe that the transportation network redesign should have been a coverage model rather than a maximized ridership model from the start, as the former is on its face more equitable. Residents had to put enormous energy and time into pushing for changes to make the original plan more equitable. Many Madison residents want to live outside of the city's central areas and want their neighborhoods to be more livable, safe, walkable, and accessible to schools, parks, grocery stores, services, recreational activities, localized commerce in addition to public transportation. I do not think that our region, let alone our society, has settled on what work will look like going forward--specifically, where we work, how we work and when we work. Yet we are forging ahead with pre-pandemic plans and have not taken the time to pause, even briefly, to learn about and anticipate how things may be changing in ways that affect residents' choices about where they want to live and what transportation needs they have. The investments we are making are hugely expensive and adding to our structural deficit. It is worth taking the time to make sure we are getting things right.

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

Having studied, used, and taught the principles of community engagement over the course of the career, I can say that we are not living up to most of them. What we have now is project-specific, haphazard, and typically enacted after initial decisions are already made by City leadership. It is essential to have a robust and accessible city infrastructure for community engagement that ensures broad representation of resident input and a way to identify and monitor issues and needs across different neighborhoods and demographic groups, as well as inequities across these groups. Meaningful community engagement on policy initiatives must occur before initial planning decisions and budget allocations are made. Residents should drive City planning and be viewed as partners and experts, not hurdles or barriers to leaders' agendas. As Alder, I will be pushing to adopt a more robust and accessible community engagement infrastructure.

Any other issues/topics you wish to discuss?

Leadership takes empathy, curiosity, humility, open-mindedness, self-awareness and self-reflection. Leaders should inspire collaboration and a unifying vision. As a leader you are accountable to your constituents and their input should be welcomed, proactively sought and thoughtfully considered. Your policy decisions should be scrutinized and rigorously evaluated in an ongoing way, and full information should be made available to constituents leading up to policy decisions and following their implementation. I have spent my life studying structural and systemic causes of social problems, listening to those with lived experiences, carefully evaluating proposed solutions to these problems, and identifying and calling out inequities and unjust practices. I would bring this lens and the knowledge and skills associated with it to the job.

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