

Herald Times Questions - March 21, 2023

Isabel Piedmont-Smith, City Council candidate for District 1

1. Which problem facing the city is the first you would want to see addressed if you get to serve on the council?

The City has many problems that we must face simultaneously. Some short-term issues that I plan to pursue are adequate pay for our firefighters (with possible early contract negotiations) and removing blockages such as parked scooters and waste/recycling containers from our sidewalks. Longer-term, housing is very important (see next question), as well as support for the Heading Home project through United Way to reduce homelessness. We must also implement the Climate Action Plan expeditiously.

2. County officials are reluctant to allow dense housing developments on the city's fringes. The city council has allowed small steps for densification in core neighborhoods, but builders have not responded by building many duplexes. Instead most new units being built are expensive high-rise apartments. What legislation would you propose that would increase the availability of affordable housing units in Bloomington? How much would that cost? How would you pay for it?

The city should facilitate the development of cooperative housing, either through the existing Bloomington Cooperative Living or a new limited equity cooperative model, which has seen success in other cities. We could use TIF funds if the housing is within a TIF district, or funds from our existing Housing Development Fund. Staff time would perhaps be the most important investment, as interested residents would need guidance on how to set up such a housing network. As far as legislation, I am in favor of chipping away at the exclusionary single-family zoning that covers most of our residential areas. The Biden administration and several state governments are allowing more housing density in cities based on economic models that show a decrease in prices.

3. Both police and firefighters have said they are underpaid and that low salaries are prompting experienced colleagues to leave for other departments that pay more. What legislation would you propose to increase retention in police and fire departments? How much would that cost? How would you pay for it?

This is not a legislative issue, as salaries and union negotiations are the domain of the executive branch. Public safety must be adequately funded. Police officers and firefighters are just some of the city staff that help keep the public safe, but it is these staff who are leaving city employment at a disturbing pace. I would support higher salaries as part of the mayor's budget proposal, and I urge the mayor to put pay increases for the firefighters into the 2024 budget proposal. (Police officers recently negotiated a new contract with significant pay increases.) I always reserve the right to vote against the mayor's budget if I feel it is unsound. Funding could come from our reserve funds, which are quite healthy, and/or through negotiated small cutbacks from other programs.