

FCNC Candidate Questionnaire for Jessica Mohler, District 3 Candidate

1. Please describe your principal reasons for wanting to serve on the Council and your involvement with neighborhoods. What are the two highest-priority issues affecting neighborhoods in your district, and what solutions do you propose?

I'm a longtime resident of the 3rd District and mother of two with 20 years of experience working in Lexington's nonprofit and arts sector: as a writer, social justice advocate, fundraiser, and for the past 11 years, as a director at the Carnegie Center for Literacy & Learning. I've lived in the 3rd District for two decades: as a student in a dorm, a renter in a historic neighborhood, and for the last 10 years as a homeowner with my husband and our children. I have witnessed the effects of Lexington's extraordinary growth from different perspectives.

Some of the greatest concerns for constituents in our district are directly related to neighborhoods. Smart and equitable growth, improved traffic and transportation, growing the urban canopy, and preserving the historic and unique aspects of our neighborhoods are concerns that I share, and that I have prioritized in my platform.

Having served on two neighborhood associations – for my own neighborhood, Mentelle Park, and on the Northside Neighborhood Association as a representative of the Carnegie Center – has greatly increased my understanding of how to protect and preserve our neighborhoods. I believe we can welcome new neighbors and protect our current residents simultaneously.

Growth is only sustainable when it is done with an equitable framework in mind. I am committed to making decisions and advocating for initiatives that work to decrease economic disparity and to make sure all the city's population is served.

2. Lexington has seen a significant need for affordable housing in recent years, especially for the most economically challenged; and the new 2020/21 budget proposes significant cuts in the Affordable Housing Trust Fund allocation and staffing. As Councilmember, what strategies would you offer for affordable housing?

Affordable housing in Lexington is in a state of crisis, and that crisis is growing. The inventory of available adequate housing is not in sync with the needs and income levels of many of our residents. The sharp rise in recent unemployment and the city's current massive budget shortfalls will only exacerbate this issue. Affordable housing is not a problem that the Council alone can solve. Forging creative partnerships with mission-driven organizations with our underserved at heart will maximize the efficiency of current resources. I believe the #1 policy to pass is fully funding the Affordable Housing Trust Fund -- a necessary building block in the creation of an equitable framework and a priority of my platform from day one.

I would prioritize subsidizing working families priced out of the market over more expensive developments. We can help more people obtain and sustain affordable housing and work proactively to finally catch up with the affordable housing shortage. I would explore new ways to

incentivize developers to create more affordable housing and when it is possible to develop new affordable housing options, I would opt for creative partnerships that are efficient and creative -- collaborations that have a focus toward hope. The Parkside Apartments project, which converted a former YWCA complex into an affordable housing complex with 36 units, is a great recent example of an innovative public-private partnership that utilized existing infrastructure to meet basic needs.

3. The novel coronavirus and resultant economic downturn has had a disproportionate impact on Lexington's most vulnerable communities. In this time of economic emergency, what are your priorities for social services and for the workforce and small business recovery?

The interplay between citizens, business owners, nonprofits and government has never been more important. Lexington's greatest asset is our people. Listening to the business owners and nonprofit directors as we move into this phase of recovery will strengthen those relationships. I'm thankful Lexington's City Council heeded the call of community leaders and residents, and restored funding to affordable housing and our Extended Social Resource (ESR) grants, utilizing an emergency "rainy-day" fund. Affordable housing is a necessary building block in the creation of an equitable framework and should have a dedicated funding stream. Providing a framework that prioritizes equitable growth -- especially for people who have long suffered under structural inequalities both economically and racially -- have been at the top of my platform since day one.

Likewise, the ESR grants directly support organizations deemed essential services. These nonprofits are the experts on the ground and are best suited to serve our most vulnerable communities. The services and programming provided by these vital organizations proactively work to combat economic, racial, and social injustice.

Working with the Mayor's office and entities like Commerce Lexington to help develop and sustainably grow the great community of Lexington businesses so they can hire more people -- and pay them more -- is just as important to bring in more revenue.

4. What do you believe are the most critical needs and most effective avenues for improving public safety in your district and in the city as a whole?

When I was first deciding whether I would run for the 3rd District, I reached out to an old, dear friend who is a bicycle police officer in the 3rd District. We are both Anthropology graduates from the University of Kentucky, and he is someone who I trust as an empathetic, kind, and profound thinker. I wanted to learn more about what he saw every day. He noted that when homelessness and addiction increase so does crime. When persons with mental illness do not have access to much-needed services, crime also goes up.

The 3rd District, with its inclusion of UK, downtown, and dense neighborhoods sees its fair share of low-level crime and crime that can be traced back to root problems such as homelessness, addiction, and mental illness.

If elected, I will advocate for harm-reduction approaches for our neighbors battling addiction and encourage permanent supportive housing models such as “housing first” to help resolve root cause issues directly related to homelessness and chronic homelessness, while working to make the 3rd District safe for everyone.

5. To what extent do you find Lexington’s current zoning enforcement, code enforcement and building inspection adequate, and how would you propose to improve them? Do you support instituting rental licensing and inspection for Lexington in the near future?

I’ve attended meetings of the Task Force on Neighborhoods in Transition and one of the recurring concerns I heard was the use of code enforcement. The use of code enforcement to bully our residents, especially our older neighbors, is unacceptable. Who can file a code enforcement violation and when an enforcer is allowed to enter someone’s home should be regulated. People shouldn’t be cited for not having a fresh coat of paint on their house while a landlord gets away with not providing heat to their tenants. I would prioritize ordinances that put safety over aesthetics. I would be interested in looking into rental licensing if it was designed to be in compliance with key health and safety standards. This not only impacts the quality of life for the renter but for neighbors as well.

Our neighborhoods that overlap with the University of Kentucky community, however, present a completely different set of unique challenges. In these instances, I feel there is a responsibility on the homeowner to consider structural style guidelines. Vinyl boxes that destroy the character of our neighborhoods are a blight on our charming streets, and packing people in like sardines to make as much money as possible off rent causes destruction and misuse of properties. I’m prepared to have those meaningful discussions to bridge university living, which is vital to our economy and culture, and our residential neighborhoods.

6. Council is currently reviewing an Accessory Dwelling Unit ZOTA, a change in the zoning ordinance to permit and regulate independent second dwellings, including units for rent, on single-family lots. Do you support the ordinance as currently proposed or in some other form? Do you find the proposed ADU zoning suitable for neighborhoods in your district? Should it be adopted city-wide or decided differently for different locations?

Lexington is growing and the 3rd District is bearing the brunt of that growth. We are a very diverse district. Every corner has a different personality and a different priority, so I do not think a city-wide policy is the right solution.

Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) have been a strategy used in an array of cities to deal with issues of senior living and affordable housing. Owner-occupied ADUs, which is what I will focus on, is very different from secondary dwelling units used solely for long-term rentals. As one of the already most densely filled districts and with an aging population across the city, ADUs offer seniors an opportunity to age gracefully with family close by and without the high costs of assisted living. It has been noted the aging seniors make up the most significant growth in housing needs. ADUs could be part of a solution to provide affordable housing for people at all stages in life, including our seniors.

ADUs also fit into the Comprehensive Plan's commitment to increase density by allowing homeowners to add a second structure (in accordance with style and safety guidelines) on their property.

I believe we can grow in smart and equitable ways while preserving our charming neighborhoods, but how that looks and is achieved should vary from one corner of our great district to the next.

7. Council is currently reviewing business and revenue ordinances to require registration, licensing, and hotel tax for short-term rentals like Airbnb. Do you support these ordinances? Do you recommend changing or adopting zoning ordinances at the same time, to allow short-term rentals in residential zones or restrict them?

I have promised to bring an informed perspective to the council, and to me, that means I will consider all the facts before making a decision. I will look to successful models that other cities have implemented to see how those models might work in Lexington.

The largest and best-documented potential cost of short-term rentals is the reduced supply of housing as properties shift from serving local residents to serving travelers. Even my small, modest dead-end street has an Airbnb now. I have learned firsthand from the property owners that they make more money hosting tourists than collecting monthly rent. Good for the property owner, but bad for the restaurant server. By removing homes from residential markets our housing stock takes another hit and makes affordable housing even harder for our workers to obtain.

On the flip side, tourism is an important sector of our economy. Short-term rentals if regulated correctly would be a way to generate revenue through taxes and fees, which will be extremely important during a recovery budget period. We could develop a fund specifically from revenue generated on these short-term rentals to go directly towards underfunded affordable housing.

Differentiating between residential and commercial rentals, banning whole-home rentals in residential areas and forbidding short-term rentals in areas at higher risk for gentrification are all policies we could implement to mitigate negative consequences.

8. What are the priority transportation and mobility needs in your district, including those of motorists, bus riders, cyclists and walkers, and how would you meet them?

Our streets were designed for the hurried driver. I would pursue more "people-first" designs by envisioning streets as public spaces that everybody has a right to use first. I would like to see more movement on Support the Complete Streets concept, which are multimodal, and something Lexington struggles with. From downtown to campus and throughout our corridors we do not have streets that accommodate pedestrians, bicycles, transit, and other vehicles simultaneously.

We need to envision streets as public spaces first. Gardens, shady corners, benches for people to rest all encourage people to slow down and absorb their surroundings, which makes us aware of

how other people are moving on the street. Following the standards for the Americans with Disabilities Act should be our goal. When we focus support on our groups of people who need it the most -- whose needs we repeatedly ignore -- we often see that this approach benefits everyone. When we widen our streets for wheelchair accessibility and provide seating and street furniture to accommodate those with disabilities, inevitably we all gain more pedestrian-friendly streets.

While I am not a regular Lextran passenger, I whole-heartedly recognize the value and necessity of public transportation. The only point of authority Council has over Lextran is their budget, which I will diligently review. However, I would support—in any way I could—new Lextran initiatives that diversify their fleet of vehicles to entice drivers to leave their cars at home and attract new potential passengers with different riding options.

9. How urgent or important today is historic preservation (HP) and protecting Lexington's historic places from demolition? What strategies would you recommend? Should the city restore funds for HP staffing and the studies required to identify both individual historic assets and districts that qualify for National Register listing, historic tax credits and local H-1 designation?

Like horse farms and limestone fences, historic neighborhoods and irreplaceable architecture spanning more than two centuries are essential elements of Lexington's character, as well as its social and economic vitality. After decades of ill-advised demolitions, which cost us iconic buildings and obliterated low-income and minority neighborhoods — the Rupp Arena parking lot, for example — Lexington seems to have learned its lesson.

My neighborhood, for example, where the vast majority of dwellings were built between the 1890s and 1930s, includes expensive mansions, middle-income bungalows, and a substantial number of rental property, including low-income apartments. That diversity — and an excellent public school — have made it one of Lexington's most sought after neighborhoods.

National Register listings are important because they make historic properties eligible for state and federal tax credits. Tax credits are important because they help homeowners and businesses restore and reuse old buildings. Studies have consistently shown that historic tax credits pay for themselves many times over in new economic investment.

H-1 districts have been mostly positive for Lexington. They have helped homeowners keep developers from radically changing the character of their neighborhoods. The best example is Aylesford. Without H-1 protection a vibrant, diverse neighborhood would have been obliterated in the 1990s and early 2000s by student-housing landlords. However, care must be taken so that H-1 rules don't become so cumbersome and expensive that low- and middle-income residents and renters are forced out. The overall vision must be about vibrant, liveable neighborhoods.

10. What do you see as the environmental impact on our neighborhoods of an urban growth strategy focused on intensive infill and redevelopment? How do you assess our water and air quality, trees, greenspace, flood control, etc.) in this context?

Increased infill puts pressure on our sanitary sewers and stormwater systems. We have seen how our city responds to the consent decree over the last decade with ongoing projects to improve our sanitary sewer trunk lines, but making sure that we are constantly thinking 50 years ahead rather than 20 years ahead is the difference of millions of dollars over time.

Overflowing sanitary sewers means impaired watersheds, as that water flows out into our stormwater system. Our city must continue to support and expand its water quality improvement grants to increase incentive and awareness about the benefits of permeable surfaces. As we reduce the amount of greenspace within the Urban Service Boundary, we must make sure that we aren't over-paving and leading to increased runoff and flooding. Recent flash-flooding that we saw along roads like Fontaine and Midland is a result of our downtown corridor not having enough space for stormwater to permeate into the soil.

Having more trees and better designed roads is a way to improve air quality – especially in our neighborhoods that are more often neglected. We all understand how a healthy tree canopy can improve air quality and reduce stormwater runoff, but looking at road designs to have fewer stop-and-go areas where vehicles are left to idle allow our communities to breathe better. Thinking about future development means opportunities for better traffic infrastructure as well.

11. Do you find that the 2018 Comprehensive Plan policies and processes clearly, fairly and effectively guide decision making on zone changes and development plans for your District and for Lexington as a whole?

First, I want to thank city leaders for understanding the importance of a Comprehensive Plan as we experience exponential growth. This was a crucial first step in addressing the many issues our city faces. I support the goals in the plan that focus on “building-up” instead of “out.” One of my top priorities is ensuring that conversation is geared toward smart, equitable growth. A challenge is incorporating the neighbors into the early stages of development to avoid the long, expensive process of defending their neighborhoods.

In just the last year, two neighborhoods in the 3rd District– Aylesford and Pensacola Park – were forced to defend their neighborhoods. I attended the council sessions regarding the Maxwell Street development and heard the opposition by residents firsthand to a proposed development in their local area. There was a strong showing of Aylesford Neighborhood residents and UK students. It is two groups that don't always come together, but this development didn't fulfill the objective of the Comprehensive Plan to “increase density through context-sensitive design” and it didn't fulfill our need for more affordable housing by offering luxury apartments that students and workers can't afford.

I will never make a decision based on one factor or one group or one issue – as varied as they are for our city right now. My loyalty is to people and people only. Compassion drives my desire to have all the facts.

12. What or where, in your view, are the “downtown” and “corridors” in Lexington most suited for intensive growth and development, within your District, and in the urban county as a whole? Similarly, where is there “underutilized land” that would be most suitable for development? More generally, what are your land-use priorities for the neighborhoods in your district? What development is missing, and what is to be protected?

The best redevelopment opportunities in Lexington's corridors are in high-vacancy or empty retail centers, such as the old Walmart site at Richmond Road and Man o' War Boulevard. That would be an ideal place for a mixed-use development combining retail and affordable apartments, which could then have easy access to mass transit. (A small city park behind the development would help buffer redevelopment there from the existing residential neighborhood.) There are other under-utilized retail areas along Winchester, Richmond and Versailles Road, and even Paris Pike that could be redeveloped in ways that could make them easily accessible to mass transit without encroaching on existing neighborhoods. Lexington's Division of Planning staff has done some excellent work to identify these locations.

In general, I think we need to look for opportunities to create more density near in-town neighborhoods. But it must be done with small-scale developments that don't overwhelm the character and livability of neighborhoods, such as the abandoned project along Maxwell Street beside the Aylesford neighborhood would have done.

Any redevelopment must be done in partnership with existing neighborhoods. And the best way to get cooperation and buy-in for that redevelopment is to require developers to engage neighborhoods with specific plans and be willing to listen and adapt to their concerns. This is especially important in neighborhoods near the University of Kentucky campus, which often have borne the brunt of poorly designed private redevelopment projects.

13. What is your vision for preserving the integrity and character of our urban neighborhoods even as we protect Lexington's signature rural area?

Our urban neighborhoods and signature rural area are both equally important to Lexington's identity and cultural fabric. We need the other to grow in smart and equitable ways. For too long, we have invited a select few to the table. As your councilmember, I promise to come to your table. I support creating a model for a citizen participatory budget so community members have direct input on how to spend part of their public budget, which would create a more equitable distribution of public dollars and resources.

Putting the conversation in the hands of residents and through partnerships among nonprofits, businesses, and government will help achieve a unified Lexington.

I believe the key to solving Lexington's challenges is through community engagement and collaboration. I will leave all lines of communication open. I believe there is nothing more important as a councilmember than listening to people. And that's what motivates me: people. Everyday people like you inspire me to fight for our community. I am ready to get to work.

14. What key issues do you identify in revenue, expenditures, bonding, tax incentives, etc. in light of a long-term trend of LFUCG expenditures growing faster than revenue? What avenues for achieving a better balance look most promising considering not only the current economic crisis but thereafter?

I am learning a great deal about the city budget, its constraints, and the opportunities that exist for adjusting revenue and spending. As I continue to learn, I will advocate for what makes sense for the residents of Lexington, and more specifically, for people in the 3rd District while balancing our spending priorities. I would like open dialogue to occur about all the options to help understand the reasons that some options are consistently disregarded.

I believe everything should be on the table. COVID-19 has shown the importance of diversifying revenue streams. I would explore restructuring the taxation system, so that the majority of the revenue stream is not coming from one source (payroll taxes).

This is a great opportunity to restructure revenue and spending priorities that will work for Lexington. Because the state must pass an enabling statute for cities' revenue streams to change, I will strongly advocate state legislators to help restructure the taxation system so that cities can make good choices for their own citizens and with the help of their citizens. I'd be interested in looking more into our public safety funds, which accounts for more than 50% of our overall budget, that could be objectively changed.

Compassionate leadership and informed decision making will drive any strategies as I seek to fulfill one of the two charges of a councilmember: to ratify a budget for the Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government that serves ALL of its people.