

**Oshkosh Chamber of Commerce
Candidate Questionnaire**

2022 Spring Election – Oshkosh City Council

1. Please provide some personal background information.

Info:

Michael Ford
Associate Professor of Public Administration at UW Oshkosh.
Director of the Whitburn Center for Governance and Policy Research.

Background

My name is Michael Ford and I live in Oshkosh with my wife of 16 years, Allyson, and my two sons, Charlie and John. Our kids attend Webster Stanley and Emmeline Cook schools, and Ally and I both work here in Oshkosh. Since 2013 I have taught Public Budgeting and Financial Management, State and Local Government, Analytic Methods, public-private partnerships, and other classes in UW Oshkosh's Masters of Public Administration program. Prior to that I had a career in public policy.

I have deep community ties that put me in position to serve as an effective bridge between the values of Oshkosh residents and City Government. I currently serve in the following capacities:

- Member of the Oshkosh Common Council
- Member of the City of Oshkosh Plan Commission
- Member of the City of Oshkosh Committee on Aging
- Board member of Clarity Care Inc.
- Member of Oshkosh Area United Way's Fiscal Health Evaluation Committee

Please outline what you consider to be the City of Oshkosh 3 – 5 most critical issues.

Oshkosh has several pressing issues. The number one task over the next two years will be our COVID recovery. That includes following our policy to responsibly use federal ARPA funds, giving businesses regulatory relief, and developing a plan to prepare us for any future crises. The second issue is quality of life. Oshkosh is a great place to live and work, but we can always do better. I want to create a package of code changes that removes barriers to economic development, encourages downtown recreation, and makes it easy for residents to improve their properties. Third, we need action on our special assessment policy. The current situation is untenable. Lastly, we need to stay focused on keeping the Sawdust District and Oshkosh Ave development rolling. That is the future of our tax base and we need to get it right.

2. Previous City Councils have considered proposals to change the policy on how to fund the current street improvement and sidewalk replacement program. Past proposals included establishing a Transportation Utility Fee Program or a Transportation Assessment Replacement Fee as a means to eliminate special assessments for street reconstruction/improvement projects and the sidewalk replacement program. Do you support this type of a program? If so, what should be the basis to establish a transportation fee? Please discuss your position.

Yes. I am ok with a transportation utility provided it is legal, transparent, and with a clear process for appealing unfair assessments. Residents and business need to be a partner in the development of the new system.

3. Municipalities across the State are moving to Fee for Service approaches to pay for the delivery municipal services that were otherwise funded by the annual property tax levy. Do you support a funding approach like this? If so, what current city services would be appropriately funded as a Fee for Service? If a new Fee for Service is imposed, should property tax payers receive an equal, proportionate tax levy credit?

Under state law most new fees that are shifted off the tax levy require a corresponding reduction in the tax levy. I support that. In general I support user fee models for services that do not benefit the city as a whole.

4. The City established a Storm Water Utility in 2003 for the purposes of managing storm water run-off issues in the community. Residential property owners are assessed for one equivalent runoff unit (ERU). Non-residential property owners are assessed annual fees based on the amount of impervious space (parking lots and roof tops) to determine the amount of ERUs that exists on a parcel. The initial (annual) storm water utility fee in 2003 was \$19.10 per ERU and has grown to \$210.60 per ERU, a 14.2% annual rate increase. Do you believe this increase is reasonable? Please outline your ideas to curtail the growth in storm water utility fees.

No. As I stated during our budget meetings last year the growth in this fee is unsustainable. Projections shared with this council show the fee will eventually flatten. That is not enough. I support indexing increases to inflation (Consumer Price Index-Midwest Urban) to make things predictable for all.

5. Local governments have asked the Legislature to prohibit the use of physically comparable vacant properties as comparable sales to occupied properties for property tax assessment purposes, known as the “dark store” loophole. The result of this policy would allow tax collectors to more subjectively assess property value and taxes, and make it harder for businesses to challenge their tax bill. Do you support the eliminating the so-called “dark store” loophole to allow municipal assessors to disproportionately assess commercial property owners? Please discuss.

This is a bit of a loaded question as I believe there is a need, and an objective way, to assess property that considers use. I support a fairer process with clear procedures for appealing assessments.

6. The State of Wisconsin currently imposes levy limits on local municipalities, but allows for levy increases based on new development. Do you support the continuation of this? Should there be modifications? Should this be repealed? Please discuss.

I could write you a novel on this one! Local control has lost its functional meaning in Wisconsin. Indexing levy increases to net new construction is not a sustainable practice, and it encourages new development over reuse and redevelopment of existing properties. This perverse incentive bleeds into other areas of local government, including the use of TIFs and other public incentives to encourage new construction above all. To put it another way, our levy limits limit our creativity and stifle private entrepreneurship.

I believe we are elected to make difficult decisions regarding the tax levy, and support restoring our ability to do so. In a democratic society we should have local freedom to make local policy. I think this can be done without raising new state revenue as part of a local freedom agenda.