

**Oshkosh Chamber of Commerce
Candidate Questionnaire**

2024 Spring Election – Oshkosh City Council

1. Please provide some personal background information.
 - a. Name – *DJ Nichols*
 - b. Occupation – *VP, Assistant General Counsel, Great Wolf Resorts, Inc.*
 - c. List any community activities you are involved with
 - Board Member and tutor, Winnebago Area Literacy Council*
 - Weekly Volunteer, Christine Ann Domestic Abuse Services*
 - Alternate Commissioner, Oshkosh Plan Commission*

2. What are your background and qualifications for this City Council position, and what value will you bring to the City Council personally?

Professionally, I'm on the senior leadership team and an attorney for Great Wolf Resorts, Inc., a hospitality and family entertainment company with revenue in excess of \$1.2 billion last year, operations in 22 cities, and more than 12,000 employees. I primarily focus on employment law, compliance, and commercial litigation for the organization, and assist with financing, incentive packages, and construction agreements for property expansions and developments in new markets.

Personally, my mom was 19 when she was pregnant with me and raised me and my brother largely on her own. I started working when I was 14 years old, went to public school, and was the first in my family to go to college and then law school, depending on student loans and part-time jobs to pay for it all.

I have the professional experience to not only understand the impact that government can have on ensuring there is a robust business community and a vibrant downtown, but also the personal experience that government should consider working families and individuals when establishing new policies. I also believe hard work should be rewarded. I have had the opportunity to work as a business leader with municipalities to ensure there are appropriate transit options for workers going to and from our facilities, to discuss policing and security considerations for new developments, and I've seen the life-changing impact private development and new opportunities can have on communities.

I view the role of City Council as similar to a corporate Board of Directors, responsible for setting goals and priorities for the CEO (City Manager). In my professional life, we focus on SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time-Bound) goals to ensure we don't only set the right priorities, but we have mechanisms by which to measure success or failure. I understand that perfection cannot get in the way of progress, compromise is important, and we must focus on continuous improvement rather than quick or complete wins.

3. Please outline your personal top priorities for the City of Oshkosh and your plan for seeing these priorities realized.

I am running on three values that will inform how I make decisions if elected to City Council: Government Transparency, Responsible Spending, and Opportunity for Everyone. In my view, leaders of our community need to ensure they are communicating effectively, being good stewards of our tax dollars, and seeking out and considering the views and realities of everyone, especially if the people being affected are underrepresented and not in the room where decisions are made.

In terms of specific issues, a few are mentioned below:

-Infrastructure - Ensuring the City continues to improve infrastructure in a way that is equitable and sustainable must remain a top priority of the next City Council. Additionally, Oshkosh must take advantage wherever possible of resources made available through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill, including through the Regional Centers of Excellence to advise on deficiencies (e.g., high speed internet, transportation access, etc.) and identify ways in which Oshkosh can benefit.

Additionally under this heading, are a few specific areas that need attention:

-Water – the clearwells project must begin and be successful, looking at a long-term solution for aging and non-compliant infrastructure. The current pumping station is capable of meeting the water needs of the City and we must continue to look forward to handle the demands of a growing city. We must also focus on stormwater runoff to reduce basement flooding for residents, continue the work of identifying and ensuring there are affordable options to replace lead pipes, and lobby our representatives in Madison to make PFAS funds available for remediation in our waterways.

-Public Transit – workers must be able to get to work and back when schedules require. The bus system in the city has limited routes and hours, which needs to be analyzed with members of the business community to consider what additional routes, hours of operations, or other options the City should be supporting.

-High Speed Internet – in 2024, to attract and retain talent to the City (including remote professionals) it's crucial that households have access to high speed internet, including fiber. In an increasingly remote world, skilled workers will only be drawn to Oshkosh if they can expect 21st century amenities. We must work as a city to re-establish a contract to bring high speed internet and fiber to Oshkosh households.

-Trust in Government and NPS – As mentioned in Question 2, developing mechanisms by which progress can be measured is crucial to make progress – what gets measured, gets improved. Anecdotally, it's no secret that the City of Oshkosh is difficult to use, whether by the business community, private citizens, developers, or small contractors. Establishing ways in which to measure outcomes from the City (e.g., permits issued, projects completed, budget savings, etc.) and then communicate that in a uniform way to then collect something akin to a City-wide "Net Promoter Score" would provide valuable information to make residents in Oshkosh more

trusting of their government, encourage private-sector development, and drive growth in the community.

4. Several geographic locations within the city can benefit from attention to facilitate economic growth and development. Please identify and discuss what you consider to be the top two or three economic development priorities you will champion as a member of the City Council.

Identifying the business to put in place or the type of development should be done in consultation with the business community and not by the City alone. That said, in conversations with developers in Oshkosh, city services are difficult to use and zoning requirements aren't conducive to large-scale development practices. I've been told by more than one developer that they choose to develop in other cities in the Fox Valley, in Fond du Lac, and as far away as Sheboygan before Oshkosh because it's just more difficult to do projects in Oshkosh.

Indirectly, Oshkosh needs to stimulate development projects by focusing on ease of use of city services. This includes zoning code reform (similar to the success of reform in cities as big as Minneapolis and as close in population as South Bend, Indiana), but there also needs to be an emphasis on receiving feedback from the development community and modeling processes off of our neighbors, which have a proven record of attracting developers.

Directly, Oshkosh should consider formal public-public-projects like the Founders Pointe Subdivision in Sheboygan, which used resources from private developers, the City, and the County to increase housing inventory for the benefit of first-time homebuyers, tax payers, and the private companies involved. Working with neighboring governments will be crucial to address the problems facing our community at-large, and we can't remain siloed.

In terms of geographic areas that need continued economic development and focus by City Council, downtown must remain a priority, as should the Oshkosh Ave corridor. The Mill on Main and the rest of the Sawdust District must become a reality and the City should be active in its search to identify a suitable use for the former Pioneer Inn property.

5. The City of Oshkosh is considering or has considered (depending on the timing of your response) a Vehicle Registration Fee (VRF)/utility fee increase proposal to eliminate special assessments for street/sidewalk improvement projects. The Oshkosh Chamber recently surveyed its member businesses, and 26% of its respondents favored this approach, 33% favored maintaining the current special assessment system, and 41% favored including all street and sidewalk improvements in the general levy. Please discuss your position on this proposal.

We now know that a VRF/utility fee increase will be part of the solution to address special assessments in Oshkosh. The amount of the fee/increase are what will need to

be further fleshed out after year 1 given the flexibility of Council to raise or lower it. And, there needs to be consideration of what relief can be put in place for working families who can prove they do not have the room in their budget for one more tax or higher utility bills.

Special assessments are a large reason I entered this race. When the street in front of my home was replaced, a neighbor expressed concern as to whether she could stay in her home given the tax increase. It's patently unfair, in my opinion, that me and my husband, each 34 year old, working professionals, will have to pay the same for infrastructure projects as our retired school teacher and veteran neighbors, each on fixed incomes, without regard for home value or ability to pay. In my view, special assessments for street and sidewalk improvements are cruelly regressive and should not exist in Oshkosh, and elimination of the special assessments are the best policy decision made by the current Council.

The next Council will have to work to ensure street and sidewalk improvements remain adequately funded. In my view, infrastructure projects affecting the City as a whole should generally be funded through mechanisms that spread the burden, which may include through the general levy, VRF, utility fee increases, and/or shifting spending priorities, and greater focus should be made on increasing housing development in the City to reduce the burden on individual homeowners. But, as said prior, compromise is important, perfection cannot get in the way of progress, and we must focus on continuous improvement rather than a quick win.

6. Municipalities across the State are moving to Fee for Service approaches to pay for the delivery of municipal services 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 taxpayers receive an equal, proportionate tax levy credit?

Some services (like trash and recycling, street cleaning, street maintenance, snow removal, etc.) are services necessary to the normal operation of a city and should be included in the tax levy as a service provided without additional fees.

However, water and sewer services, permits and inspections, animal control, special event permits, and recreational programs should remain funded (in part) by direct payment to the municipality by the individual or business requesting the services.

7. The city established a stormwater utility in 2003 to manage stormwater 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 rooftops) to determine the amount of ERUs that exist on a parcel. The initial (annual) stormwater utility fee in 2003 was \$19.10 per ERU and grew to \$237.72 per ERU in 2023 while holding the increase flat in 2024. Do you find this rate of increase acceptable? Do you believe that continued

increases at that level over the next 20 years are acceptable? Please outline any ideas you might have to curtail the growth in stormwater utility fees.

While it's critical that the City continue to address the stormwater run-off issues that face residents and business owners, exponential tax increases are not sustainable over the course of the next 20 years. Continued research needs to be done in this area to identify solutions to address stormwater run-off issues without just throwing money at the problem. Some options include: Green infrastructure (natural or natural-based systems to manage stormwater such as permeable pavement, green roofs, rain gardens, bioswales, constructed wetlands, etc.), public education (workshops and education to modify behaviors that reduce stormwater runoff on private properties), and regulatory measures (such as enforcement of sustainability, erosion and sediment control measures built into zoning practices).

In short, the Stormwater Utility is a crucial part of maintaining viable infrastructure in Oshkosh and the funds must continue to be used to construct storm sewers. But, the city cannot tax its way out of this problem and some part of the solution will need to include changes in the way we develop property and green space, and inform our residents about how they can make a positive difference in this area.

8. There is currently a proposal being brought forth to change the title of "Mayor" to Council President" to reflect the post's lack of executive powers. Furthermore, the proposal eventually has the position being selected by the City Council and not voted on by the electorate. Do you support or oppose this proposal? Please provide your reasons for your position.

Whether the current position of "Mayor" remains with the same title or if it changes to "Council President", the decision should be made by voters in Oshkosh. Elected officials should not, even if permitted under law, change their own titles, duties, terms, or other key elements of the job. The structure that exists today was established by referendum and the structure should only change by referendum.

Further, in my conversations with hundreds of voters over the last several months, changing the title of elected officials in Oshkosh has not come up as a priority for anyone. Said another way, this is not what's being talked about by people at their kitchen table. If someone is passionate that this change is important, they should propose a referendum through the process ascribed by state statute.

9. With a low unemployment rate and strong local economy, many employers report difficulty attracting and retaining talent. What is the city's role in attracting people to Oshkosh and ensuring that Oshkosh is an attractive place to live and work?

My husband was recruited to Oshkosh for his job as a General Surgeon at Aurora, and we were able to make the move because my job as an attorney and on the senior leadership team for Great Wolf Lodge has been 100% remote since the beginning of the pandemic. Part of what attracted us to Oshkosh is access to the Fox River and Lakes Winnebago and Butte des Morts in the summer, park space and recreational

fields, and relatively low cost of living. The City must ensure that these attractive qualities remain true.

Additionally, as Oshkosh continues to grow, the City must ensure roads and other physical infrastructure remain in service and high quality, the waterways remain clean and easily accessible, and public safety remains a high focus.

The City must also take-on projects that employers and employees expect of cities in 2024 (and 2050 and 2075) like high speed internet access, a focus on environmental impact and sustainability related to city projects, continued development of housing stock at all income levels, outreach related to DEI initiatives, and representation of historically marginalized groups.

Crains reports (referencing a study by Columbia University) that over the course of the next 25 and 50 years, greater immigration to the United States and the impact of climate change will cause migration to the Great Lakes region. Oshkosh must ensure that it has scalable infrastructure in place – housing, water, high-speed internet, etc. – to be ready should that occur and be a choice destination for employers and employees in the Midwest.

10. A housing study completed for the City of Oshkosh in March of 2022 noted that Oshkosh is expected to grow by more than 3,200 residents by 2030, meaning the city will need to produce almost 1,700 new housing units. While Oshkosh has made significant progress in this area, there is still much work to be done. What do you see as the primary barriers to increasing the housing stock in Oshkosh? What will you do to address Oshkosh's need for additional workforce housing.

I'm going to copy a portion of my response to question 4 because it's responsive to this section, too:

In conversations with developers in Oshkosh, city services are difficult to use and zoning requirements aren't conducive to large-scale development practices. I've been told by more than one developer that they choose to develop in other cities in the Fox Valley, in Fond du Lac, and as far away as Sheboygan before Oshkosh because it's just more difficult to do projects in Oshkosh.

Indirectly, Oshkosh needs to stimulate development projects by focusing on ease of use of city services. This includes zoning code reform (similar to the success of reform in cities as big as Minneapolis and as close in population as South Bend, Indiana), but there also needs to be an emphasis on receiving feedback from the development community and modeling processes off of our neighbors, which have a proven record of attracting developers.

Directly, Oshkosh should consider formal public-public-projects like the Founders Pointe Subdivision in Sheboygan, which used resources from private developers, the City, and the County to increase housing inventory for the benefit of first-time homebuyers, tax payers, and the private companies involved. Working with

neighboring governments will be crucial to address the problems facing our community at-large, and we can't remain siloed.