

Oshkosh Chamber of Commerce  
Candidate Questionnaire

2024 Spring Election – Oshkosh City Council

1. Please provide some personal background information.
  - a. Name: Kristopher Ulrich
  - b. Occupation: Professional Volunteer & At-Home Parent
  - c. List any community activities you are involved with: Oshkosh Chamber Singers, Oshkosh Southwest Rotary, Menominee South Neighborhood Association, OASD, First Congregational Church, Landmarks Commission, & 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?

I invite every reader to learn all about me on my website at <https://www.ulrichofoshkosh.com/about-kristopher>. There, you can read about my family history, personal history, work history, volunteerism, passion for local history, my decade with Rotary International, and noteworthy recognition.

In short, I'm a 6th generation Oshkoshian. I'm a product of our schools, our community, and our shared history. My highest level of education is a Master of Business Administration from UW Oshkosh. Before leaving the workforce in 2018 to be an at-home parent, I worked for the Oshkosh Area Community Foundation. I have volunteered extensively in Oshkosh for well over 20 organizations ranging from Mercy Medical Center to Habitat for Humanity, Sleep in Heavenly Peace, OASD, and many more. This is my tenth year as a Rotarian. Additionally, I have served on three City commissions: the Landmarks Commission, Stormwater Board, and Plan Commission. I've observed that the most effective Council leaders have served on City boards to learn how our local system of government actually works.

As a townie and local history enthusiast, I will bring to Council an insight into decisions that have shaped our past. When making any decision that has great emotion or community concern surrounding it, I find it important to look back in time to see what precedent came before us. Often, it is helpful to look back and see where we've come from as we pave the road before us to where we're going. In addition to the value I bring that comes with my professional, personal, and volunteer history, I bring the offering of nonpartisanship in these partisan times, and a promise to scrutinize every issue for its own merit without the influences of political parties or special interest group goals. I will deliver data-driven decisions, and I have the capacity to treat the role of Councilman as a near full-time job.

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

On my website, <https://www.ulrichofoshkosh.com/platform-points>, you can read about the topics I intend to pursue in much greater detail. In short, I want to restore voter faith in nonpartisan Council leadership and data-driven decisions. I want to improve City policies on communication when new projects are proposed in your neighborhood. I want to support a thriving downtown, creative solutions to our housing crisis, preservation and adaptive reuse of our historic architecture, and anything to keep up the beauty of our parks. If elected, I would ask to be appointed to the Landmarks and Plan Commissions as their council representative.

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.

**South Main St.** This area has been on hold for a while, but I expect it to get moving again shortly. The whole stretch of South Main from the river to South Park is at the brink of greatness. I'm picturing that stretch at the end of this decade with the Miles Kimball Apartments, Mill on Main, and hopefully something on Pioneer Island. We've seen that the area can hold its own with economic drivers like the Arena and Fifth Ward. An infusion of residential and commercial properties to the area is bound to be a hit. I expect creative people will be rewarded as they bring unique new businesses to this location.

**Oshkosh Ave.** So much work has been done here already, and I don't want attention to be drawn away from it just because it isn't a "brand new" development area any more. Great businesses are still being built, and more plans are likely on the way. Oshkosh has long needed this kind of attention to be brought to a major east/west corridor from the highway into the city. Let's keep that momentum going.

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.

I wrote about this at length in a blog from January 18th. I support the move away from special assessments. The VRF is not perfect, but the solution that the Council voted on is a better solution to what we had been doing. The costs of special assessments were getting way out of hand. My full article can be read here:

<https://www.ulrichofoshkosh.com/post/special-assessments-vehicle-registration-fee-wheel-tax-or-special-fees>

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?

Our current way of funding municipal services is adequate. As I understand Wisconsin law, whenever we set up a new general fee, that corresponding cost has to be taken off our levy. Fees are a slippery slope. Just look at how big the debate was for a \$35 VRF and imagine the chaos that could ensue if every general municipal service became fee-based. Our taxbase is stretched thin. The amount that citizens are paying between the school district and the city is getting out of hand for many of us. I'm not opposed to fees when they make sense for individual items, like building permits or liquor license fees, but even those I think ought to be scrutinized to see if the amount Oshkosh is charging is in line with comparable markets.

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.

I used to think it was acceptable when a private service like my phone provider increased its price \$10 every few years because I expected those fees to level out and I knew I was getting better service as coverage area and data speeds improved. I don't think that way at large any more, especially where city charges are concerned.

That being said, I have at least a little insight into stormwater utility having served on the stormwater board for a year and a half. I can say without a shadow of a doubt that the monies collected for these efforts have been put to good use - important use - to protect all of us at large from floods. It's a lot of work. We are in a much better place today than we were during our 500-year flood in 2008 because of the myriad of storm sewer projects that have taken place. Hard work and important projects require funding, and Oshkosh needed the revenue source to get a lot of work done relatively fast. We're a flat, low-lying city, and there's still work to be done to ensure fewer citizens are at risk of a flooded basement.

Still, this fee seems to have no limit to its growth, and it doesn't seem sustainable. If past performance is indicative of future potential, we'll be seeing \$300/ERU before the end of the

decade if it's left unchecked. Many of the initial projects we had planned for are completed, so I suspect this fee will naturally level off. I'd like to see the city set it to \$250 and cap it for at least five years, with a plan to reduce it in subsequent years. That way we taxpayers can at least expect another small bump for one year, and then consistency through the end of the decade, followed by reduction.

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.

I was asked this question during an Eye on Oshkosh interview in February, and my opinion is still the same. The title of Mayor is misleading, since the Oshkosh Mayor is not equal to the mayors of say Neenah or Appleton who are also the executives of the city. Those individuals are elected and then take on a full-time job managing the city and its personnel. That's not how Oshkosh is set up. It gives our citizenry the false impression that they have more duties than they actually do. I agree with the need for a figurehead of the Council to lead meetings and serve as a ceremonial entity to welcome dignitaries, make proclamations, nominate citizens to fill commission openings, etc. I think calling this person a "Council President" is acceptable.

My opinion continues, however, with opposition to the way this change may occur. Because the election of a Mayor by the electorate went to referendum 20 years ago, I do not think that Council should unilaterally make a change to the position. If the discussion continues, I would vote for this to go to a public vote again to make any future change. It is dangerous to flat out take a voting right away from our population. The public should be educated on the current roles of the Mayor, and it should be a question added to a future ballot again for us all to decide whether we still want or need to vote for this role.

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?

We have entities like Discover Oshkosh, GO-ECD, and the Chamber that work to promote the amenities and opportunities of our home. It's up to the City to make sure that Oshkosh has good roads, infrastructure, beautiful parks, progressive planning, safe residential and commercial districts, etc. The policies that we put in place and the action taken by City employees provides a firm foundation from which those I mentioned first in this response can build upon.

If we really want to shine though, the City could make some radical decisions that would draw the attention of a young workforce in their 20s & 30s. Downtown in particular could use some big draw that people make a point to drive to, like what Neenah just did with its ice rink. Or we could work to make significant improvements to our childcare infrastructure.

When last year’s debacle over the closure of the UWO childcare facilities happened where parents were given barely two months’ notice that they would be without childcare, I couldn’t help but be furious on behalf of my friends with kids who were up a creek. If you’re out of the loop, let me tell you - the waiting lists for childcare can be unacceptably long. It’s a nightmare for parents. Thank goodness the YMCA was able to step up in some capacity in that space. We just don’t have enough childcare services in Oshkosh. Our young workforce in their 20s/30s with kids face the decision of continuing their career or taking care of their kids. This is both a private and public sector issue. When employers wonder why there is a labor shortage, availability of childcare plays a part in that equation. Related to this, I’m pleased that the new housing development on the 600 block of Main & Jefferson is going to have a dedicated childcare business downstairs. That’s smart planning.

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.

You can read a 2700-word blog that I wrote about our 2040 Comprehensive Plan right here: <https://www.ulrichofoshkosh.com/post/reading-into-our-2040-comprehensive-plan> In it, I talked about this very thing. Here’s an excerpt:

“Since 1980, the historic population growth rate in the county has been lower but has somewhat mirrored the growth rate experienced by the City. A significant growth in population during the 2000’s (11.7%) was the highest growth rate in the period shown. In comparison, the state grew significantly, but at a slightly lower rate during the 1960’s (11.8%), and has been a little less subject to the larger ups and downs in growth rate” (Oshkosh 2040 Comprehensive Plan pp 2-3).

**Table 2-1: Historic Population Growth, 1980 to 2015**

|                        | 1980          | 1990                            | 2000                            | 2010                            | 2015                            |
|------------------------|---------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| <b>City of Oshkosh</b> | <b>49,620</b> | <b>55,006</b>                   | <b>62,916</b>                   | <b>66,083</b>                   | <b>66,900</b>                   |
| Winnebago County       | 131,772       | 140,320                         | 156,763                         | 166,994                         | 168,526                         |
| Wisconsin              | 4,705,642     | 4,891,769                       | 5,363,675                       | 5,686,986                       | 5,753,324                       |
|                        |               | <b>Percent Change 1980-1990</b> | <b>Percent Change 1990-2000</b> | <b>Percent Change 2000-2010</b> | <b>Percent Change 2010-2015</b> |
| <b>City of Oshkosh</b> |               | <b>10.9%</b>                    | <b>14.4%</b>                    | <b>5.0%</b>                     | <b>1.2%</b>                     |
| Winnebago County       |               | 6.5%                            | 11.7%                           | 6.5%                            | 0.9%                            |
| Wisconsin              |               | 4.0%                            | 9.6%                            | 6.0%                            | 1.2%                            |

Source: U.S. Census, 1980-2010, WDOA, Wisconsin Demographic Services Center, 1/1/2015 Final Estimates

So, you've read in the papers and heard from candidates and community leaders that the population of Oshkosh is projected to rise by over 7700 people between 2010-2040. That's about an 11.7% increase. In the 30 years prior, from 1980-2010 the population growth was closer to 33%. Consider the ways that the City was able to accommodate that growth in the 80's & 90's compared to what we can do in the 20's and 30's. When I was a kid we built the house on the corner of 19th & Knapp, then we built out on Westbreeze and Sheppard. Expansion largely went westward, pushing the boundaries of Oshkosh right up to Algoma, with plenty of us who considered themselves Oshkoshians building new homes around the actual border of the city. The nature of housing is changing, as we'll get to in the next section. Council and Plan Commission will likely be presented with plans for more dense apartment-style housing within the city limits, like we've seen pop up along Marion over the last decade. While my personal preference is to live in a single-family house, I know that doesn't reflect the wishes of our entire population. The desire for attractive flats is there, and I'd like to bring that added population density downtown to live, work, and play.

...If you grew up here, then it's likely you understood that Oshkosh was a cheap place to live. Our cost of housing was low, as was food, entertainment, and everything else. I hate to say it folks, but I think that it's time for us to reevaluate that old adage. If you believe the hype numbers on Zillow and similar realtor sites, the value of my home has increased well over 60% in just 11 years. Have you tried to sell or buy a house within the last four years? Home values are through the roof, which makes it harder for families buying a house to get their footing. This is echoed in the rental market where monthly rent at places like the Wit is in the ballpark of \$2000. I don't understand how this is sustainable for a population. When such a disproportionate amount of one's income goes to housing, how can anyone properly budget for childcare, food, investments, etc.? A one-size-fits-all solution to housing doesn't work. We need more affordable options and a greater pool of housing items for people to pick from.