

Lincoln Chamber of Commerce Candidate Questionnaire

Leirion Gaylor Baird – Mayoral Candidate



1. The City is a large and complex organization; tell us about your experience and how it has prepared you to successfully manage city operations.

Throughout my career, I have worked to find ways to do more with less. As a management consultant, I helped Fortune 500 companies grow and become more efficient. During the past six years as a city-wide representative on the Council, I have found innovative solutions to deliver essential city services like responsive emergency medical, police, and fire protection; safer roads and sidewalks; and improved parks, pools, trails, and libraries.

2. Lincoln is a growing and vibrant community with citizens engaged in varied interests and pursuits; how will you bring disparate groups together to build consensus? How will you as Mayor set a standard for civility?

I am proud of my work on the City Council to build consensus that achieves meaningful results for our residents and businesses. I worked across party lines on everything from Open Data to Recycling to the Safe and Successful Kids Initiative, and my commitment to bipartisanship has generated many unanimous votes of the Council, even on controversial issues. As mayor, I will continue to set a tone of civility and lead by example.

Collaboration is particularly important as we grow our city. I envision bringing community members, business leaders, and stakeholders with varying perspectives together literally around a table to navigate the challenges we will face together. Cities gain momentum when citizens unite around a shared priority: when many of us work together as one. Strong partnerships among visionary business leaders, a supportive City Hall, and committed citizens play a key role in Lincoln's trajectory of success.

3. How will you as Mayor set the Legislative priorities of the City of Lincoln? Would you envision working with City Council members and giving them a voice in this process?

During my 12 years on the Planning Commission (2007-2013) and City Council (2013-present), I have listened to and worked with Lincoln residents, our business community, and city staff to move our city forward. This experience has helped develop my opinion that public safety, infrastructure that enables economic growth, and quality of life are priorities on which the City should focus. Within that framework, the most successful projects are ones that have support from the community. I intend to ask for input across the city to identify projects that are important, impactful, and broadly supported. The City Council will play a critical role in this. I know firsthand that Council members have the best chance to improve and advance legislation if they receive information early in the process and meet regularly with the mayor's office to voice their ideas. Legislation I proposed and passed in 2017 created more time during the budget process for the Council to communicate and collaborate with the mayor's office is one example of how I think the process works best.

4. The Citizen's Transportation Coalition recommended an increase in the local option sales tax to help finance Lincoln's streets infrastructure needs. Are you supportive of the proposed quarter-cent sales tax increase?

The Citizens' Transportation Coalition determined that Lincoln has a \$33M gap in resources needed to adequately fund our street needs. I have voted for increases in road maintenance funding every year I have been in office. In 2017, I supported buying equipment that sped up pothole repair by 50% with increased effectiveness. Improving our roads network, repairing potholes, and rehabilitating our neighborhood streets is an ongoing responsibility that I take seriously.

I am glad that Lincoln residents will have the opportunity to decide whether they want to invest in improving our streets. Nearly a third of the revenue collected from this sales tax will come from people outside of Lincoln who use our roads. This compromise package deserves support, as it will inject needed funds into vital infrastructure that drives economic growth, creates jobs, improves safety, and contributes to our quality of life.

5. The City receives approximately \$.16 of every dollar a city property owner pays in property taxes. What action would you take given the double-digit increase in proposed residential property valuations?

In 2017, when the County Assessor greatly increased home valuations, I led the effort to lower the property tax rate and shield homeowners from the full impact of the valuation increase because I understand the importance of acting with both the best interests of homeowners and responsible budgeting in mind. This year, we are experiencing a projected shortfall in sales tax receipts, so we should wait to see the full revenue picture before finalizing the tax rate. It is important to note that the City uses the majority of the money received from property taxes to support essential services like police and fire protection and roads — working to provide these essential services at the lowest cost possible. I have shown year after year that I analyze every part of the city budget for efficiencies while working to ensure top priorities are addressed and obligations are met, and I will set a tax rate that protects the taxpayers.

6. What strategies would you pursue to keep the city affordable to live in?

Housing affordability is an issue facing many thriving cities across the country. As with most complex problems, there isn't a single solution to this issue. Housing affordability includes safe and decent housing options, which means codes enforcement. It means protecting the existing housing stock we have that is already affordable, so we don't move backwards. It means increasing the supply of new housing by partnering with non-profits like the Lincoln Housing Authority and NeighborWorks and supporting the creation of community land trusts to establish permanently affordable housing. It also means workforce development so that citizens have the tools to maximize their earning potential. I am proud that I'm the only mayoral candidate who took action in last year's budget to address the issue of affordable housing.

7. Lincoln is expected to receive additional revenue from internet sales tax collections. What should the City of Lincoln do with the additional revenues?

Shopping habits are changing in the 21st century. As retail spaces are less frequented, internet sales are increasing. In order for our city to adjust to these changing trends, any funds from internet sales tax collections first should be used to meet our budget requirements—helping balance what sales tax revenue no longer comes from traditional retail. With any additional balance of funds, the City should focus on bolstering the ranks our first responders to help ensure safety and appropriate emergency response times in our growing city.

8. What do you see as the City's role in retaining incumbent businesses and attracting new businesses and employees? To thrive, businesses must have access to talented people. The City helps make this possible by creating a place where people want to live. Lincoln needs to be safe and affordable. It needs to have good restaurants, retail, and schools, and it needs to be fun, interesting, and attractive. The City also can support schools and organizations that prepare people to be good employees. Finally, the City needs to provide infrastructure and incentives, as well as be a willing government partner for businesses looking to invest and add jobs in our community.

On the City Council, I have voted consistently to help companies like Olsson, Nelnet, Hudl, and Scheels grow their operations and create good-paying jobs. To help lay the foundation for our community's economic growth, the City must ensure our infrastructure is sound, well-maintained, and ready to meet the needs of our diverse business community.

9. What will you do to drive innovation in the Lincoln community?

Innovation will be both a mindset and a core value in my mayoral administration. This means being open to new ideas and unafraid of change. Building stronger innovation ecosystems, using digital technologies to modernize government operations, and supporting expanded access to broadband guide my approach.

My record on the Council demonstrates my commitment to supporting innovation. I voted to support new entrants into the broadband and cable market and to create a public-private partnership to transform Lincoln into a gigabit city. In doing so, we have created a competitive landscape that is not only saving money for businesses, but also equipping them with digital infrastructure that enables them to compete and innovate in a marketplace increasingly reliant on faster speeds and greater bandwidth.

Within City Hall, I initiated a partnership with Bloomberg Philanthropies' "What Works Cities" program that helps local governments improve residents' lives by using data and evidence effectively to address pressing challenges. Bloomberg provided hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of free consulting to assist in the development of LNKStat (a tool for measuring and evaluating city performance) and implementation of our city's new Open Data initiative, a bipartisan effort co-created by myself and another former Council member to accelerate residents' and entrepreneurs' ability to utilize public data in informative and innovative ways.

As mayor, I will continue to forge partnerships like these that help city government innovate and will work to build our city's brand as a hub of innovation. We are so fortunate to have a vibrant startup community, and many of these new businesses rely on our low cost of living to recruit new employees and keep costs down. I am committed to ensuring strong city infrastructure and a high quality of life that attract and retain employees in Lincoln and cement our growing reputation as an epicenter of the Silicon Prairie.