



## Livable Neighborhoods, Inc.

www.livable-neighborhoods.org

To improve and promote the livability  
of all neighborhoods in the La Crosse area

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### 2013 La Crosse Mayor/Council Candidate Survey

Livable Neighborhoods is a non-profit citizens group established in 1996. Our purpose is to improve and promote the livability of all neighborhoods in the La Crosse area. As part of our mission we encourage citizens to research and discuss important issues facing our community. Certainly one of the most important of those issues is who we should choose to represent us in local government.

The following questions have been developed to help La Crosse residents learn more about the candidates for Mayor and city council prior to the spring election. We are inviting each candidate to answer these questions with a 3- to 5-sentence response. The responses of all candidates will be collated and made available at <http://livable-neighborhoods.org> and in the local media. Your answers will be quoted without summary, editing or editorializing.

Please complete the survey by typing in your best answers to the highlighted questions in the row below. As you type, the row will expand, so you should not need to do any formatting. Or if you prefer, you may hand write your answers (please number) on a separate piece(s) of paper. Your response will be posted online and shared with the media exactly as you return it.

Please return your survey by Monday, March 18 to [president@livable-neighborhoods.org](mailto:president@livable-neighborhoods.org). Or you may mail it to **Charley Weeth**, 122 17<sup>th</sup> St S, La Crosse, WI 54601-4208.

Questions? Please contact **Charley Weeth** at 784-3212 or **Charles Clemence** at 738-1736 or [vp@livable-neighborhoods.org](mailto:vp@livable-neighborhoods.org).

Thank you for your willingness to serve. And good luck in the upcoming elections.

Name:     Jessica Olson    

Address:     1219 Madison St    

Phone:     608-782-0808    

Email:     OlsonApartments@gmail.com    

Candidate for Mayor       Candidate for Council       Council District Number     6    

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## Questions

1. Political experience is helpful in governing a city, but effective leadership skills may be gained in many different ways. Please list the work, business, civic, or charitable experience that best demonstrates your ability to manage city operations

I grew up in my family's business here in La Crosse, helping my parents take care of their student rentals, doing everything from cleaning up litter to mowing lawns, vacuuming hallways and painting bedrooms. I went along with my dad when he met with vendors, contractors, and bankers, and as I get older I am being taught more of the financial end of the business. I am now entirely in charge of materials purchasing and sourcing supplies and parts. The philosophy that made my family's business successful can make the city successful as well: The most important factor isn't how fancy your buildings are, it's whether the people are happy living there. When people are happy, they stay put. When they are unhappy or the cost of living is too high, they find somewhere else to live.

2. The City of La Crosse is facing budgetary problems stemming from increasing costs and stable or decreasing revenue. Assume the city is facing a situation where budgeted expenses are expected to exceed revenue by a significant amount. How would you address this shortfall?

1. Pursue and promote grant-writing activities between City Hall and local organizations to bring funding into the municipality from state, federal, private etc. sources for a variety of social justice and neighborhood revitalization initiatives, reducing burden on the city to generate revenues to solve all the problems.
2. Increase the number of citations for willful non-compliance with our municipal codes. No more "get-out-of-jail-free" cards for slumlords—if they are breaking the law and refuse to change their business practices the city needs to run them out of town by hitting their pocketbooks. The double-effect is that less slumlords means less enforcement burden, which is a cost-savings.
3. The Fire Department is a sizeable expenditure for which the cost of maintaining is placed primarily on the shoulders of La Crosse taxpayers while neighboring taxpayers and non-taxable institutions receive the benefit of its' existence should a special emergency occur that they would be called to respond to. This is unsustainable and inequitable, and the concept of "regional" or "district" fire protection should be examined to reap benefits of cost-savings through elimination of redundant equipment and staff and fairer cost distribution to those who benefit from the existence, training, skills, and benefits of our Fire Department.
4. Work to increase demand for owner-occupant homes to help drive home values upward, thereby increasing tax revenues through higher property values.

3. What do you feel are the greatest problems facing La Crosse neighborhoods? How should the City focus its revitalization resources? Specifically, please discuss and rate the importance of the following factors:

- Aging and dilapidated housing stock.

Important. We need owner-occupant homes to be inspected at point-of-sale to help prevent these homes from turning into rental properties. No one should be allowed to defer maintenance for decades and "cash out" leaving a home that has no usefulness except as a rental property.

- Attracting middle class residents to La Crosse neighborhoods.

Extremely Important. We need to work with realtors to make sure they have every bit of knowledge to give as strong a "sales pitch" as possible to the folks looking to buy homes, to promote the benefits of living in La Crosse that are NOT available to non-residents.

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- Developing job and business opportunities for residents.

Important, but we need to be careful not to “hurt” businesses by the government “trying” too hard. La Crosse taxpayer subsidy is inappropriate in the creation of jobs that can just as easily be held by persons living in La Crescent or Onalaska, because it is economically equivalent to subsidizing the creation of jobs IN La Crescent or Onalaska, giving no “payback” to the La Crosse taxpayer. The city must also be careful not to subsidize saturated markets lest we run the private market entities out of business(i.e. don’t subsidize too many coffee shops or ice cream parlors otherwise they are all going to go out of business because we, as a population, don’t have unlimited disposable income to “spread” around to an artificially high number of these entities to sustain them). The reason we can’t “coffee shop” our way to shared prosperity is because it is a “sloshing” of internal wealth, not expansive growth. Expansive growth is based on “export” or “export equivalent” business, whereby money flows into the city from outside of the city. These types of businesses are better candidates for assistance from the city, since the resultant growth will naturally create increases in disposable income(more money to “slosh” around), which in turn naturally creates a better market for “coffee shop” or “boutique” types of businesses to spring up and thrive on their own.

- Neighborhood institutions (parks, schools, libraries, civic organizations, etc.).

I was lucky to grow up in La Crosse and enjoy so many of the activities and opportunities that make a childhood rich with culture and happy memories. Without these enrichment opportunities, drugs, alcohol, crime, and delinquency are the result of having young people with nothing to focus their time and energy towards.

- Licensing landlords, limiting the conversion of owner occupied homes to rentals, etc.

We currently have a “licensing” program that has been poorly organized and abandoned(not updated since 2009—the “current” list includes landlords who have been deceased for over a year), and not enforced. In 2009 the review committee, which included landlords, gave the inspection department the directive to go after the unregistered rental properties by sending notice through the tax bills(this would have cost \$500 per year total to include a 1-pg flyer in each outgoing tax bill) and to monitor rental advertisements. This could also have easily been investigated by compiling a list from the assessor’s office of all properties where the tax bill is sent to an address other than the property for which it is being billed. In 2010, the census revealed we have over 1,600 rental units MORE than what had been registered through the first five years of the mandatory inspection program. Mr. Kirch accurately determined that approximately 750 of them were exempt Housing Authority rentals, however, this still leaves hundreds of rental units that the inspection department has never inspected, which, until Sep 2012, included the 6<sup>th</sup> street apartment that had a floor collapse. This was a key illustration of the point we made in 2009 that the most dilapidated and dangerous properties are the ones whose owners have failed to come forward and register. We need to fix the registry and go after unregistered rentals.

Attempting to legally prevent the conversion of rental properties is problematic under the City Planning Zoning subchapter of Wis State Statutes, under §62.23 (7)(gm):

**(gm)Permits.** Neither the city council, nor the city plan commission, nor the city plan committee of the city council, nor the board of appeals may condition or withhold approval of a permit under this section based upon the property owner entering into a contract, or discontinuing, modifying, extending, or renewing any contract, with a 3rd party under which the 3rd party is engaging in a lawful use of the property.

Since the rental of a residentially zoned property for use as a private residential dwelling constitutes a

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“lawful use of the property” under state law, this pretty much prohibits the city from trying to prevent anyone from converting their property to a rental property. If we attempt to write municipal code that infringes upon statutory property rights, we risk having a lawsuit happen like what happened after the 1989 R-1 rezoning issue.

Many landlords are very interested in looking at a state-level licensing system, akin to what realtors currently have. Our driver’s licenses, hunting licenses, medical practice licenses, legal practice licenses, etc. are ALL administered by the state government, so it makes sense that landlords be licensed at the state level as well.

The city of Winona has been dealing with an expensive lawsuit from property owners for over a year on a similar issue and is currently waiting for a ruling from the Minnesota Supreme Court. Other cities who have tried to enact extreme property-rights restrictions on rentals have also faced expensive and miserable lawsuits. This is FAR from the spirit of community building we are desperately in need of.

No owner-occupied property ever converts to a rental unless the owner-occupant let it get run down enough to cash flow as a rental. We have a variety of programs to help homeowners of every income level and ability to keep their properties in great shape and we need to be proactive in helping the housing stock improve and appreciate in value. This is the only fool-proof way to prevent landlords from buying more houses and converting them into rentals.

- Please sum up your approach to stabilizing and improving La Crosse’s neighborhoods.

Code Enforcement, Paint & Fix-up, Rehab the worst, Bulldoze the dumps, throw the criminals in jail, citations for willful noncompliance, aggressively market our city to young homebuyers, and plant daffodils along our entry corridors. 😊

4. La Crosse is blessed with a unique and varied natural environment. While this is a great benefit, it can also pose challenges to expanding the tax base.

- Should the city strictly apply its development standards within three miles of its border as allowed by law and laid out in the comprehensive plan?

Yes.

- Should the City create development strategies or growth plans for surrounding towns?

Not unless they request our help or input. They should be the ones to create the plans and we should be an advisory role.

- Should the City consider extending sewer or water services without requiring annexation?

No. If extenuating circumstances ever prompt me to vote otherwise, I will have a good explanation ready.

- Do you support continued funding of the bluffland acquisition program?

I do not have access to the information surrounding the recent issue with MVC, so I respectfully decline to give a specific answer, except to say that I support protection of ALL of our assets of nature, including the river, bluffs, forest, and marshland.

5. The north-south corridor remains part of the La Crosse Area Planning Commission and the Department of Transportation’s long-range transportation plan for the La Crosse area. This despite the 1998 referendum turning down the 5B-1 proposal.

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you believe there is a need for new north-south road through the city of La Crosse?</li> </ul>
<p>No.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you believe other projects, such as the proposed extension of 12th Avenue S in Onalaska to State Hwy 16 or the proposed traffic roundabout at 7th &amp; Cass, should be developed as alternatives to a new corridor?</li> </ul>
<p>I have not accessed the details of these plans or spoken to enough people to formulate an opinion. The roundabout concerns me due to the “learning curve” of knowing how/when to signal when exiting (which is what I experienced when driving through a town with many of them recently). I am open to considering arguments for/against, especially from the people living at these locations where the work is proposed.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you believe the city should pursue measures to curb use of single occupancy vehicles as alternatives to a new road? For example, regulation of neighborhood parking, special fees and assessments for parking, and encouraging alternatives (walking, biking, car pools, mass transit etc.).</li> </ul>
<p>Commuter parking permits are something I would support, as long as the cost of enforcement is not greater than the revenue generated, and student parking permits are another option I would consider, as long as they are priced to reflect the lower income levels of students as opposed to commuting workers. I am glad to see many students bringing bikes and walking around town more, but we also need to remember that a large part of our student population works jobs/internships/student teaching/volunteering/etc. at hours and locations that are never going to be adequately serviced by bus routes or practical to ride a bike to. Trying to force students to get rid of cars by making on-street parking TOO inconvenient/expensive is going to cause landlords to tear up lawns at single-family homes to create concrete parking pads(which creates a cost-burden to the city by increasing storm-water runoff but cannot be financially offset because single-family homes are billed one flat ERU regardless of how much concrete is added), or push the students into neighborhoods where it IS convenient or free to own a car, which will defeat the benefits of density and centrality to establishing a better campus bus system for the students to get around. A CRITICAL part will be strict adherence to 1-1 resident/stall off-street parking in new student housing. Developers of new student housing should NOT be gifted concessions on parking standards NOR should they be allowed to create “unsupervised dorms” with no occupancy limits, thereby harming tax revenue, and burdening taxpayers into providing ridiculous amounts of on-street parking for their resident tenants. The whole concept of parking standards was to hold developers responsible for providing parking for their own tenants/customers rather than burdening taxpayers with that cost.</p>
<p>6. How would you promote the safety of pedestrians and bicyclists throughout the City?</p>
<p>Traffic tickets for people who fail to brake at cross-walks for people crossing, encourage pedestrians/bicyclists to wear reflective tape at nighttime. Bicycles should be required to have a headlamp on at night. Many of the capital improvement items have been studied and outlined in the recent plan passed by council and funding should be sought from outside the city coffers if available.</p>
<p>7. Recently La Crosse has seen a disturbing increase of accidental deaths and other serious problems related to alcohol abuse. What do you think the city’s role is in stopping and reversing this trend?</p>
<p>We’ve been trying to stop it for decades. Education has been tried and tried again. Starting with Oktoberfest, aggressive ticketing might make bad behavior sufficiently “un-fun” to realize some change. The Fire Department may also have jurisdiction and justification to step in and mitigate some of the out-of-control situations at house parties, simply because the danger increases exponentially once droves of people are packed into a relatively small area that was not designed for so many persons to be in at the</p>

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same time. The Police Department should build upon its cooperation with Campus Police as well as UWL's disciplinary arm to apply leverage against negative student behaviors, be it probation or expulsion.

8. There has also been a recent series of violent deaths, assaults, and drug related crimes in the city. Does La Crosse have a problem with the growth of serious crime? What measures would you take to improve public safety in this area?

Some argue we still are overall a very safe place to live and raise a family. What matters the most is perceptions of that safety, more than the actual statistics or comparisons to other cities. Some crimes are of the nature that we shouldn't allow it to affect our feelings, since they could have happened anywhere to anyone and there isn't a single thing our public safety departments could have done to prevent from happening, even if they had all the money in the world to spend on making our streets safer. What we CAN fight are the systematic problems that lead to recurring crime, the gangs, the drug business, etc. The Neighborhood Revitalization Commission, through grant-application and capital improvement budgeting, is going to be key in addressing many of the environmental factors that lead to fear of crime, such as street lighting, cameras, CPTED principles, blight issues, neighborhood watch, etc. I would like to see the NRC be the council's arm in working with(and between) neighborhood groups and the police department, perhaps as both an advisory as well as fiscal partner.

9. Historic preservation has become a popular method for neighborhood revitalization in La Crosse. The city currently has several historic districts and dozens of designated properties. However, all requests to demolish historic buildings have been approved by the city council.

- Should the historic status of a building have an impact on whether it is demolished?

Yes

- What criteria should the city use to evaluate the impact of a development on historic properties?

Consult experts.

- Should the city provide funding and/or technical help for property owners to maintain and renovate historic buildings?

Yes.

- Should the city's ordinance be changed to give the Heritage Preservation Commission more than just advisory authority over designated properties?

We need to be careful not to overstep property-ownership rights. If a commission has too much authority over a house it scares away potential buyers/investors.

10. Do you think the City has assisted or thwarted attempts at regional cooperation? What direction would you give department heads to encourage such cooperation?

I think it is premature to tell department heads how to do their job without knowing the full background behind the situations they have been placed in. Cooperation is vitally important, but we are not sending our department heads into negotiations with the sole intent of "making friends". They are sometimes placed in situations where they are expected to negotiate on behalf of the interest of the city and its taxpayers, and I realize that in some instances it might be better to walk away from the table than agree for the sole sake of being agreeable.

11. Public opinion polls show that most people want to cut the size and cost of government, but there is no consensus on where to cut and how much. What is your approach to spending and taxes? Would your goal be to decrease taxes, hold them steady, or allow for some increase?

We absolutely need to do everything and anything to get taxes down, it will be the only way to draw young families back into town to buy their starter homes. Here's how the math works. You have a set amount of income from which you have a set budget to pay your property tax + mortgage. The more you have to pay

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towards property tax, the less you are putting toward your mortgage and the less equity you are building. The less you have to pay towards property tax, the more you can afford to put towards your mortgage and you can afford a nicer house under the same total housing cost (tax + mortgage). Who wouldn't want a nicer house for the same price?

How we get there is another story. A lot of what is happening that drives the costs so high is not within the control of the city council. If we can find ways to relieve administrative burdens on the departments, through technology, better software and database sharing, etc. or we find ways to fairly allocate costs to institutions or persons who receive the benefits of our city's services, we might be able to bring the cost of living in La Crosse into better alignment with surrounding areas.

12. A large part of the cost for providing city services is currently borne by property taxpayers. The city has the ability under state statutes to establish utility districts and user fees so all property owners pay for the services provided and received.

- Would you support creation of a utility for fire protection? A fire protection utility would charge to all property owners based on the level of fire protection needed.

See above, Question #2

- Should the city look to fees and fines as a source of revenue or as a cost recovery device only?

There is a difference between fees and fines. Fees are forcefully assessed regardless of "wrongdoing". Fines are assessed as a result of someone being caught committing "wrongdoing". Neither one should be viewed as "source of revenue" because you are not "producing" anything, you are simply removing money from someone's wallet and that generally makes folks unhappy. If the city was selling cookies or banana bread, the money it collected selling such goods would be a "source of revenue" because it was doing something in return for the money it received, and the customer willingly chose to buy the product, it wasn't a forced transaction. To seek to make "profit" off of a forced transaction generates a lot of ill feeling towards the city.

- Currently there is a controversial plan to raise fees relating for all types of city services. Do you think current fees are adequate or should they be raised?

Fees do not attract people to live here, so get rid of them.

13. La Crosse voters soundly defeated a proposal to hire a city administrator. However we are in a shrinking group of cities without professional administrative expertise. Do you think the referendum settled the issue of a city administrator or should the discussion continue?

no

14. The Joint City-County Housing Task Force identified a number of actions aimed at that it felt would help the revitalize neighborhoods and expand the tax base. The number one recommendation was "Better education and enforcement of existing codes and standards". Do you agree? If so, how what changes would you suggest be made at City Hall?

Issue Citations for willful noncompliance.

15. Finally, what do you want voters to know that haven't been brought out by our questions? What experience, ideas, qualities, etc. do you have that make you the better choice?

To be honest, I don't know my opponent, so I have no reason to believe that I am a better choice than him. In fact, there are many people better qualified than myself to serve on council. But these people will never run for office because of the awful way we treat each other in this city. Look at what people did to Matt Harter. Look at what people did to Audrey Kader. Neither of them are the "devil incarnate" but they were both impaled and burned at the stake. Who wants to be treated with the disrespect we have come to

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accept as “normal” in the course of holding public office in the City of La Crosse?

I responded to a very NASTY fight over garbage with “outside-the-box” thinking, namely “Dumpster Diversion”—something EVERYONE would be happy with. That’s the only thing that’s really going to improve our city. It’s not whether so-and-so gets their way, it’s whether we can come up with ideas that make progress for everybody without generating animosity.