

## ICDD Questionnaire for 2025 Iowa City Council Candidates - November 4, 2025



**Iowa City Council Candidate: Megan Alter**

The following questions are designed to further explore your understanding of Downtown Iowa City and the Iowa City Downtown District (ICDD), as well as our advocacy priorities.

**The following documents are available for your review:**

[Downtown Advocacy Statement](#)

[ICDD Strategic Plan Summary](#)

**First, about yourself and your candidacy:**

- Briefly tell us about your candidacy and priorities as a City Councilor.

I am running for re-election as I near the end of my first term in office as an at-large city councilor. My priorities in the next term follow what I have been championing during this term: to make daily life for Iowa City residents (and visitors) better. This is even more important now than ever. There are numerous federal and state instabilities and threats to the vibrancy of the city, and so I am more determined now to ensure that Iowa City is a haven, is welcoming, and provides some measure of joy to everyone who lives and visits here.

What does that mean concretely?

My priorities are to address the need for affordable housing across the spectrum: for permanent supportive housing for the most vulnerable to workforce and first-time home owners and additional market-rate homes. Additional priorities are to help families and businesses with local childcare solutions—whether that looks like an apprenticeship model to train new childcare professionals or to develop short-term pop-up care for families needing a few hours here and there. Finally, with budget gaps and threats from the state and federally, we must do everything we can to retain and expand a strong local economy. To me this means bolstering our strengths like the DD and by rejuvenating areas throughout the city, like South of 6 and the IC Market place. With

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each area complementing one another the city will be stronger economically as a whole and residents will choose to shop, play, and stay in IC.

- What are some areas where these priorities align with the ICDD objectives?

With supportive housing, our residents who find respite downtown, at RAL, and the library will finally have a place to call home. With attention to more housing across the market, more people will be able to live in IC and it will be easier to choose to come downtown—for shopping, entertainment, work, or leisure. Quite simply, with more housing available in IC (including within the DD), the more our Downtown benefits.

The relationship between available childcare and economic health is well-established; it helps with employment recruitment and retention. Additionally, with Iowa City's increased emphasis on entrepreneurial efforts and inclusive small business ownership, childcare that is right-sized and varied could be a growth area and different model for success. Larger models of childcare centers are increasingly difficult to sustain. As placemaking continues to evolve (with 21 S Linn on the horizon as well as changes to the Chauncey and Hotel Vetro) perhaps there is room to grow childcare as a DD consortium. Given that many Downtown businesses rely on "on-site" workforce, this may be an example of big thinking and collaboration with IC that helps all around.

Growing our economy throughout IC is a win-win. The DD on curating and bolstering its brand of 'original and authentic' while complementing additional economic and retail hubs. I am excited about the expansion of the SSMD district. The DD should be a model for additional business districts in IC: identify the character of the area, recognize the needs and wants of residents over time, and shape the economic district to meet that need.

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The Iowa City Downtown District (ICDD) represents the core commercial area of local businesses, institutions, residents, and property owners, and is committed to advancing a downtown that is clean, safe, inclusive, and economically vibrant.

As a candidate for City Council, your perspectives and priorities will directly impact Downtown's future. Please help the public better understand your positions and knowledge by responding to the following questions.

*You are encouraged to reference the **ICDD Advocacy Statement** and **ICDD Strategic Plan**.  
(400-word maximum per question)*

- **Public Safety in Downtown**
- **Identifying the Greatest Challenge**
- **Downtown Development + Policy Mix**
- **Liquor License Policy: 500ft rule/University Impact Area**

1. The ICDD believes a successful downtown must be clean, safe, and vibrant. In terms of "safe," what stakeholders and/or agencies do you believe need to be engaged to support a welcoming and safe environment for everyone in Downtown Iowa City?

The theme for my answer regarding safety in the DD is to continue strengthening relationships. The DD and IC must continue to engage with one another and with our additional local agencies and groups. I include the University of Iowa USG, sororities and fraternities, clubs, IC's daytime officer as well as the ICPD more broadly, staff at RAL, and the ICPL. These groups and staff can provide feedback and help create a safer environment all around. I also believe the Ambassadors' Group should have check-ins with these groups to discuss what they see every day and night. I know that the DD already engages with local direct-aid agencies like Shelter House and CommUnity. Increasingly, I see a need for the DD and IC to meet with Eschucha Mi Voz and other Immigrant-serving agencies to consider safety for undocumented workers. These touchpoints must be consistent, not merely when there is a safety issue to be solved; instead, by talking about observations, experiences, and trends, there are opportunities to be proactive. Further, problem solving is an ongoing process. One component I need to circle back to is that Councilors need to understand issues as well; I meet regularly with the Executive Director of the DD to talk about what's top of mind for people who work downtown. The consistency has given me a good sense of what concerns are ongoing, what concerns are nascent, and what may be one-offs. I would like to broaden these conversations to include the night mayor, the ICPD's day officer, and additional DD members. The DD experiences in a concentrated way so many of the issues facing the city: increasing numbers of unhoused people needing shelter and supportive services, pedestrian and vehicular congestion leading to anger, concentrated vape and alcohol shops as well as a

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bar district where people play, but may be hazardous. All of these circumstances need a collaborative and consolidated approach to ensuring safety for everyone involved.

2. In your opinion, what is currently the **biggest issue facing Downtown Iowa City**, and how would you propose addressing it if elected?

The biggest issue facing Downtown right now is ownership being too concentrated in the hands of too few people, and that the driving interest does not support the goals for a thriving downtown. Rather, these interests are simply to increase rents and profits. This reality has driven at least one long-time unique local business out of the original SMMD district, and its replacement has no local connection and little long-term value in the area since it is a vape shop. This is not to say that all businesses in the DD should be homegrown, but the DD has put a lot of effort into creating an 18-hour attraction for people of all ages with different interests. The contrast is that with concentrated ownership and a driving desire to increase profits, the business landscape will change. Bars are the driving money makers downtown, and they will (and are) trying to increase their presence with the encouragement of a property owner. I moved here in the 1990s and I remember when the Downtown District was almost entirely a college bar scene with a few burger and pizza places. The shift over time has been an incredibly good one for Iowa City and I would hate for it to shift back. We need to continue to support small business owners, retail of all types, restaurants that provide a variety of experiences at different costs, and keep our local arts as a focal point. To be clear, the City does not have control over who owns what or how much. But we can help mitigate the type of business offerings in order to help the vision of an unique 18-hour experience for all residents and visitors. I have supported this by implementing the 500 foot overlay of tobacco sales as well as continuing support for the existing overlay of liquor licenses. Our additional efforts to maintain and bolster inclusive and diverse businesses come through small business grants. This is not the same as property ownership, however. Our best defense is to continue policies that discourage oversaturation of business types.

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3. Downtown is a prime area for both new development and the renovation of existing structures. What do you believe is the **right balance of density, building height, zoning, historical preservation, and development incentives** for Downtown? How should the City Council engage in supporting or regulating this balance?

This question made me laugh because it is so comprehensive and could take pages to answer. My short answer is that we need to keep to the spirit of the Downtown District while also allowing for new opportunities. We do not want to diminish the history of Iowa City's downtown, but we do want to add to it for future generations, and that means thinking expansively for business opportunities at the same time we think about what those footprints actually look like. We want to model how old buildings should be cherished and burnished while also showcasing new buildings to complement the landscape and the age(s) we live in. Downtown is not a relic, but nor should its material history be destroyed in the name of progress. So what does that mean in more literal terms? I am a fervent believer in case-by-case assessment. I do not believe that preserving and improving historical properties should be so onerous that developers step away from deals, but nor I do want to see our iconic buildings razed by the highest bidder. I do not think we as a city should shy away from tall buildings as a guiding ethos. In fact, we have a really cool skyline because of the Vue (take the Hwy 218 exit into IC by Menards at night to see it), and the Chauncey has proven itself a beautiful anchor. Ultimately, we need to think about how new construction can add to our identity, needs, and yes, brand. We need to continue to incorporate innovation with identity.

4. The City of Iowa City has a zoning overlay called the **University Impact Area**, which restricts the issuance of new liquor licenses within 500 feet of an existing one unless the applicant qualifies as a restaurant. What do you believe are the **intended and unintended impacts** of this policy on Downtown's business environment, diversity, and growth? What are your thoughts on this existing zoning overlay?

The impacts of our overlay have been helpful to the diversity of downtown in my opinion. We have seen more restaurants make their marks; bars have created character and appeal as part of their brand, not just crazy drink specials used competitively. We have deliberately expanded the way people interact with downtown, and I think the overlay contributes to that. There is more to do for families and tourists during the day while still catering to a robust nightlife. Of course, during my time on council I have also seen that this liquor license restriction makes it more difficult for existing bars to upgrade if it means they are technically expanding their square footage footprint. (The specific examples I am thinking of are knocking down an interior wall to create one bar under one liquor license while another wants to create a second floor patio). The logic of not allowing these exceptions is so that a large building currently subdivided with different businesses can't be gutted in order to create a single mega-bar.

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Presently, the process to override the overlay is to go through City Council; we tend to be cautious granting exceptions because of creating imitable precedents and creating the impression of subjective judgement. Most property owners/bar owners simply want to better their own patch; however, property and business sales do happen and new entrants to the DD might want to expand their footprint very intentionally. If we allow too many exceptions then Council weakens one tool we have to make sure the DD remains more commercially diverse.