

**Oshkosh Chamber of Commerce
Candidate Questionnaire**

2025 Spring Election – Oshkosh City Council

1. Please provide some personal background information.
 - a. Name: Joe Stephenson
 - b. Occupation: Economic Development Program Manager
 - c. List any community activities you are involved with: The Grand Oshkosh Board Member, Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Authority Board Member, American Planning Association District Representative. Past Midtown Chairperson, Former Oshkosh Food Coop Board Member, Former Museum Board Member, and Former Sunday School Teacher at Saint John's

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

I bring a strong background in economic development, planning, and municipal governance. As an Economic Development Program Manager, I have worked with businesses, entrepreneurs, developers, and community organizations to promote growth, job creation, job retention and housing development. My service on the WHEDA Board has provided firsthand experience in addressing Wisconsin's housing challenges, while my leadership roles in the Grand Oshkosh and APA have strengthened my ability to collaborate with diverse stakeholders.

On the City Council, I bring a solutions-oriented mindset, emphasizing economic growth, strategic planning, and fiscal responsibility. I use my expertise to foster well-balanced development that benefits both residents and businesses while maintaining the unique character of Oshkosh.

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

Economic Development & Revitalization – Strengthening our local economy by supporting businesses, attracting investment, and ensuring Oshkosh is at the forefront of development.

Housing & Affordability – Expanding housing options across all income levels by encouraging diverse housing types and reducing unnecessary barriers to development.

Creating a Community-Focused Budget – Ensuring that taxpayer dollars are used efficiently to support services and infrastructure that directly benefit Oshkosh residents. While giving our residents a voice at the table with how their taxes are being spent.

Supporting and Revitalizing Neighborhoods – Investing in strong, connected neighborhoods through housing initiatives, infrastructure improvements, and open and frequent communication with our established Neighborhood Associations.

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 Side Redevelopment & Riverfront Activation

The Fox River waterfront is one of Oshkosh's most valuable assets. I will support projects that enhance public access, attract private investment, and create a dynamic waterfront district. Projects like the Herd Arena and the Mill on Main will serve as anchor developments in the district but additional infill, promotion for existing businesses and other developments need to be secured as well.

Downtown Business & Housing Expansion

The success of downtown has been transformative, but there is more work to do. I will advocate for mixed-use developments that provide additional housing and commercial space while preserving Oshkosh's historic charm. Our downtown needs to not only be a place of employment and housing but a destination for others outside of our community to visit.

Industrial & Business Park Expansion

Strengthening our manufacturing and industrial sectors is crucial for job growth. I will work to expand business parks and ensure Oshkosh remains a competitive location for new and growing businesses. We have seen a handful of new industrial buildings come to both our north and south industrial parks. New city infrastructure to make truck shipping routes and rail access more accessible will make these areas more desirable and expand our industrial footprint. Providing quality jobs for our residents.

North Side Subdivision Expansion

While we have done a great job with infill projects and redevelopment of our core areas, the city has lagged behind its peers when it comes to single family subdivision growth. We need to prioritize expanding northward, one of the few directions we can continue to grow. New subdivisions growth will not only add to our housing stock but also increase our workforce population. Something that many of our businesses are in need of.

5. 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?

I am open to fee-for-service models only if they create a fairer, more efficient way to fund city services without overburdening taxpayers. If new fees are introduced, property

taxpayers must receive a proportional tax levy reduction to ensure they are not double-charged for the same services.

Items that could use a fee for service model are: services not currently offered at the city, services that are funded through other non-levy mandates and any service that would gain efficiencies or cost reductions through a fee for service model. In addition we need to ensure that services we offer to neighboring municipalities are the same cost as services we offer to our residents. I do not support fees for service or increases in fees for service where it would put Oshkosh at a competitive disadvantage like building permits, subdivision fees, or liquor license applications, among others.

6. 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 the increase was held flat in 2024, the fee increased another 4% in 2025 to \$243.84. 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.

The unfortunate reality is that Oshkosh is at the end of a watershed, meaning we receive all the stormwater and runoff from our upstream neighbors. These areas, primarily rural, lack the infrastructure to slow or treat water runoff, leaving Oshkosh to manage the consequences. This has resulted in the need for significant infrastructure investments to prevent severe flooding and damage to homes and businesses. Additionally, state mandates place stricter stormwater requirements on urban areas like Oshkosh, while rural agricultural areas are exempt—creating a perfect "storm" of rising costs and necessary improvements.

That being said, I do not believe stormwater rates will continue to rise as dramatically as they have in the past. Many large infrastructure projects have already been completed, and the City has shifted to a more proactive approach in responding to state treatment changes. Previously, Oshkosh reacted to regulatory changes; now, we anticipate and prepare for them, helping to stabilize future costs.

To further curtail the growth of stormwater fees, I support:

1. Stormwater Retention Districts in Outlying Areas
 - Several years ago, Oshkosh requested that Winnebago County implement stormwater retention districts in surrounding rural areas. Small, upstream changes are significantly more cost-effective than major infrastructure investments at the watershed's end. The County Board voted this down, but I still support it as a common-sense solution that benefits everyone.

- While a countywide approach is ideal, Oshkosh can also implement retention zones within the city as we continue to grow.
- 2. Using Tax Increment Financing (TIF) for Stormwater Infrastructure
 - TIF dollars do not come from the general levy or impact stormwater rates, making them a strategic funding source for large projects. This was successfully done with the Butte Des Morts Apartments project, and I will continue to advocate for similar approaches where feasible.
- 3. Exploring Alternative Funding Sources
 - State and federal grants should be pursued aggressively to offset infrastructure costs.
 - Green infrastructure solutions (e.g., permeable pavement, rain gardens, and expanded retention basins) can reduce runoff naturally, minimizing the need for expensive capital projects.

Oshkosh has made major strides in addressing stormwater challenges, and while costs have risen significantly in the past, our more proactive approach should prevent similarly steep increases moving forward. However, we must remain diligent in advocating for upstream solutions and utilizing creative funding mechanisms to keep rates as manageable as possible for our residents and businesses.

7. There has been considerable confusion and discussion regarding the increase in Oshkosh residents tax bills following the reassessment process last year. Because the City is still out of compliance with the equalized values of commercial properties, the City must conduct another reassessment of all commercial and residential properties this year. In your opinion, what would be the best avenue for you as a city council member to communicate important issues such as this to taxpayers?

No communication strategy is perfect, and outreach efforts will never reach everyone—but Oshkosh actually does a better job than most communities when it comes to keeping residents informed. In my work, I travel across the state and interact with many local governments, and I can confidently say that Oshkosh uses more communication methods than many of our peers.

That might surprise some people, but it highlights an important reality: Even a city that communicates frequently and through multiple channels will still struggle to inform every resident. At the end of the day, communication is a two-way street—the city can put out information via social media, in-person meetings, TV, video, neighborhood meetings, and mailings, but it’s up to individuals to engage with that information.

Moving forward, I believe we need to:

1. Continue using multiple outreach methods frequently and consistently.
2. Direct residents with specific tax questions to the City Assessor.

- General information meetings are helpful, but they can't address individual tax situations. If someone has concerns about their property assessment, they need to go straight to the experts who can explain it.
- 3. Ensure our communication is clear, accurate, and realistic.
 - We shouldn't sugarcoat problems or overpromise solutions. People appreciate honesty, and we need to be upfront when things aren't going as planned. I was disappointed in our messaging the year prior to the reassessment and I think the overly optimistic messaging hurt communication.

While this wasn't directly part of the question, I'll say this: The large assessment spikes we saw this year were avoidable. The reason they happened is that past councils waited seven years to reassess properties instead of conducting regular, incremental reassessments. If assessments were done more frequently, we would see less dramatic jumps and more predictability for taxpayers. That's something we need to keep in mind moving forward.

- 8. 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?

The City must play a lead role in attracting and retaining talent—this is an issue that keeps me up at night. Having enough workers to fill jobs and sustain our economy will define this era. Cities that successfully grow their workforce and population will thrive, while those that don't will struggle with economic stagnation and increasing tax burdens, as fewer businesses and households share the levy.

I believe Oshkosh can rise to this challenge. But it's not just about making Oshkosh a place where people want to move—it's about making Oshkosh a place where people want to stay and raise a family.

To do that, we must focus on:

1. Enhancing Quality of Life
 - Investing in parks, trails, and entertainment options that make Oshkosh a more attractive place to live and work.
2. Ensuring a Safe Community with Strong Schools
 - Safety and school quality are two of the biggest factors families consider when choosing where to live. We need to ensure Oshkosh remains a safe city while supporting efforts to strengthen local schools.
3. Expanding Housing Options for All Stages of Life
 - We need housing at all income levels and for all demographics—from apartments for young professionals to starter homes for families to smaller cottage-style homes for retirees looking to downsize.
 - Without enough housing, we can't grow our workforce or attract new residents.

By focusing on these priorities, Oshkosh can position itself as a city of opportunity, stability, and growth—one where people want to live, work, and build their future.

9. 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.

Housing is one of my areas of expertise, and I believe that if Oshkosh takes a proactive, strategic approach, we can outpace other communities in meeting housing demand, growing our workforce, and keeping housing affordable at all income levels. Many cities are facing the same housing challenges we are—but the communities that act decisively will thrive, while those that fail to address these issues will struggle with worker shortages, stalled economic growth, and rising housing costs.

Oshkosh has already made important strides in addressing housing needs, but more must be done. We must remove barriers to development, create financial incentives to support construction, and ensure that both new growth and redevelopment opportunities are maximized. This means focusing on:

Key Barriers and Solutions

Growth Limitations & Infrastructure Expansion

- a. Oshkosh has limited areas for expansion, particularly due to infrastructure constraints. Extending utilities northward will be essential for future growth.
- b. To compete with surrounding communities, we should explore deferred road assessments, making subdivision development more cost-effective and attractive to builders.

Regulatory Barriers & Perception Issues

- c. Oshkosh has made major improvements to zoning codes over the past five years, but simplifying and modernizing regulations must continue to ensure a smooth building process.
- d. Beyond regulations, we need to actively market Oshkosh as a development-friendly city. The perception that Oshkosh is difficult to build in is outdated—we need to tell our story and demonstrate that we are open for business.

Financial Support & Strategic Incentives

- e. We need to leverage TIF districts and state housing programs to close funding gaps for challenging projects.

f. The Affordable Housing TIF Extension provides an opportunity to offer builder credits for infill development, making it more financially viable.

Redevelopment & Infill Housing

g. While outward growth is important, infill development is the most cost-effective way to expand our housing stock—it utilizes existing infrastructure, making it more efficient and affordable.

h. I support aggressive action on vacant and underutilized infill lots and would advocate for EPA brownfield grants, similar to what Calumet and Outagamie Counties have secured, to help clean up contaminated properties and make them viable for development.

10. If elected, how would you support the business community

A strong business community means a strong Oshkosh. In both my professional career and council role, I am dedicated to helping businesses succeed and grow. I have spent my career supporting economic development, advocating for businesses, and working to create opportunities that benefit our entire community.

My commitment isn't just words—I have demonstrated it through action, working directly with businesses to cut red tape, secure funding, and promote growth. As a Council member, I will continue to champion policies that foster entrepreneurship, strengthen our local economy, and make Oshkosh a place where businesses can thrive.

11. What specific issue, challenge, or concern are you interested in solving while serving on the City Council and why?

Many of the challenges we've discussed—housing, workforce development, and keeping taxes manageable while maintaining vital city services—are deeply connected. If we don't take decisive action now, these issues will only become more difficult to solve.

I want Oshkosh to be a place where everyone has the opportunity to thrive—where families can find housing, businesses can grow, and workers can build their futures. I want Oshkosh to be a city that people choose to live, work, and play in—not just today, but for generations to come. That means smart planning, bold leadership, and a commitment to progress. That's what I'll continue to fight for on the City Council.