

Alder Candidate Forum

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SPEAKERS

Jennifer Ondrejka, President, Lynn Wiskowski, VP, Junction Ridge Neighborhood Association
Nikki Conklin (alder candidate), Paul Skidmore (incumbent candidate)

Jennifer Ondrejka 00:38

We'll give it another minute or two here just to get a few more people joining. Yeah, we have almost 20 people signed in, but there were about 40 who registered.

Jennifer Ondrejka 02:22

And just saw about one more person in here. Right. Wonderful. Oh, and three more. Okay. Yes. All right, well I can start and admit others when I think as I see them, I guess. All right, so people could mute themselves that would be greatly appreciated. Thank you. Okay. Welcome, everybody. I'm really glad you could join us. I'm Jennifer Ondrejka, the President of the Junction Ridge Neighborhood Association, and my Co Host is Lynn Wiskowski, who's the Vice President of the Association. Hello. We wanted to do this forum because everyone knows the election is April 6, and the position of alder is extremely important. The alder is our best contact with city government. So, we have the two candidates, and you'll be able to hear them talk about their positions and their backgrounds. And then we have nine questions that were pre submitted, and we'll have them answer those. So you can make an informed decision for April 6. Let's see, okay, nobody's still signing on this second. So we'll go ahead and introduce the candidates. First we have Paul Skidmore, who is the incumbent in the alder's position. He's been the incumbent for about 20 years I think so many of you know him. And the challenger is Nikki Conklin. Nikki is new to the elected political game but has held a lot of leadership positions and advocacy and not for profit organizations. So, if you each want to take a few minutes and introduce yourself to the audience. Paul I think you were going first. Right.

Paul Skidmore 04:43

Yes, thank you, Jennifer and Junction Ridge Neighborhood Board, thank you very much for the opportunity to allow us both to have this opportunity to speak to you and introduce ourselves and answer questions. Thank you very much. I am Paul Skidmore, I am your alder at this point I bet your alder for the last 20 years and I'm running for reelection. Because I believe that I understand the needs, wants and concerns of my constituents, and that I have the education knowledge and experience to effectively represent you all on the Common Council. I've had the opportunity to get to know, get to know you. Over the years, particularly Lynn and Jennifer and some of the past presidents. I really enjoyed working with you and working on issues that are important to the district. I'm nonpartisan, I do not represent a political party ideology or a new narrative, my constituents include individuals, organizations and businesses who live, work,shop, or visit this district. I have 20 years of experience working with constituents, city staff, four separate mayors, three city attorneys, and many other staff members to solve problems and help manage the ninth district, and the city of Madison, I've served on many city boards, committees, commissions, Task Force and workgroups. I have extensive

professional background in public safety, public works planning development and park planning and design. I am a licensed landscape architect and I've been doing that for more than 35 years now. So, and I love my work. I believe that I understand how to meet the needs of my constituents as well as the needs of the city of Madison as a whole. I also believe that I have the understanding, and represent the values and interests of my constituents. So with that I'll yield the rest of my time, and I look forward to the questions.

Jennifer Ondrejka 06:55

Okay, Nikki Conklin.

Nikki Conklin 06:59

Hello everybody, my name is Nikki Conklin, and I am running to be your alder in District Nine, because I want to be the new, young, active alder, and I really want to bring power and representation to all the members of the community. As a deeply rooted neighborhood leader, I have experienced firsthand the issues that need tackling in this district, as a community activist, mother, first generation college graduate and deeply rooted neighborhood leader. I have lived experiences that nobody else has. As a mother with a degree in human services, living, working and raising her children. And one of the most segregated districts and the most segregated state. I have the skills needed to bring the changes in this district. A little bit of my background is I have been living in Wexford Ridge for the last 10 years while doing so I've also been deeply involved with the Lussier Community Education Center. I started off volunteering there. I became a staff member, I was an AmeriCorps member, and I even sat on the board of directors. The Lussier Center for me is really my heart and I really believe that is the heart of this District Nine. They've given me so many opportunities and one of the opportunities I received was called the Neighborhood Organizing Institute. And that is really where I develop my leadership skills. It's a leadership development program for grassroots leaders, community activists and neighborhood leaders like myself. I've also learned the skills on how to organize and I actually organized residents here in Wexford Ridge, we got in front of Jason Haganow, who's the property manager of meridian. And I was on the team that actually stopped people's cars from being towed. They had put in place, a lot of barriers for so people can obtain their parking passes and they weren't leaving any information out when they would tell people's cars so they would wake up in the morning they would call the police because they didn't know where their cars were folks would have overnight nurses come in and in the morning when they wake up their cars were gone, and you know they were just making it so the office is only open from nine to four you know most people work nine to five. They wouldn't let people park in the, in the visitor parking overnight, even though that's what visitor parking was for. So there's a lot of things that I didn't like and I really felt like how do I stop these things, how do I change these am called Terra Nova space famous words were organized and I was like, oh yeah I know how to do that. And that's what I did I got a group of residents together, we got in front of Jason and we actually got the cars to stop being towed and that was about two years ago. So from that success I really learned that people do have power, and our voices are power. So the more voices we have the more power we have. And that's really what I hope to bring to District Nine is bringing power to the people really let them know that their voices are being heard and represent those voices at the table. And for that, that's just a little bit about me so I'll leave it at that and let's start with the questions. Thank you.

Jennifer Ondrejka 10:34

Thanks Nikki. All right, we have nine questions that were submitted. And what we're going to do is, I'll ask the question, and then the candidates will take turns they get one minute. Lynn is going to give a 15 second warning, and the one minute cut off. And we'll alternate who answers first. Okay, Jennifer do you want to hit record. Oh, yes. Oh my gosh. Excuse me folks should be at the bottom there. Unfortunately, it's

Paul Skidmore 11:59

I just, yeah it's recording.

Jennifer Ondrejka 12:00

Okay. Oh, wonderful, thank you. I still have still not coming up here. The screen is sort of frozen on my end

Nikki Conklin 12:09

that's working hard. Okay, sorry

Jennifer Ondrejka 12:13

All right, the first question. One of the planks in both of your platforms is public safety, or safety for all was another way it was put, starting with Nikki know how much more about what that means.

Nikki Conklin 12:36

I think it was actually starting with Paul.

Jennifer Ondrejka 12:38

Oh, I'm sorry. All right, starting with Paul. What does it mean that about your plank is public safety.

Paul Skidmore 12:49

Public Safety is job number one. I have heard this for many years now about the, the increase in crime, and the decrease in public safety. Over the last couple of years we've experienced about a 99, excuse me, about an 89 79% increase in violent crime stolen car shots fired. There was one tonight on Gammon Road. So, matter of fact that I was notified on as people are rightfully afraid, and we need to get a handle on this. Number one, our police department is understaffed number two it their respect for the police department, and we have many issues beyond that. But this is a safety issue, and that there's a significant debate among some of my colleagues as to whether (time)

Nikki Conklin 13:56

Yes, safety for all is one of my platforms. When I say safety for all I mean that we all have our basic needs met. When people have their basic needs met, housing, employment, education, health care access. People in turn are healthier. When you have safer communities, meaning that you have all your basic needs met, you're going to have healthier communities. Public Safety is very important. It's very important that we have the correct trained professionals, going to the correct calls you know the correct professional jobs that they're so needed to do. I think that we really need to make sure, and thank you as alder. I will focus on public safety making our communities safer by having our basic needs met,

housing, education, employment and access to health care, which in turn will make us a safer community.

Jennifer Ondrejka 15:01

Okay. The second question is, there's a proposal right now to cut the number of orders in half. And to make the remaining alders full time city employees at a higher salary. How would that change the way the council functions. Do you think it would benefit your constituents, or harm them. Nikki.

Nikki Conklin 15:30

Yes, that's a great question. Obviously I haven't sat on the Common Council yet. But just as in running my campaign, I can see the need of why we need our alders to be at full time. This is a very intense position, it's very important position. And in order to fully serve your constituents, you need to be able to have the time and the energy to properly serve them to be able to advocate for them and be able to listen to them. I think, cutting the number may be harder though because then you have to take out more, more and more on your plate. You're going to have to cover two districts and district nine we know is a pretty big district by itself so having two districts would be a little bit more difficult so I think keeping the number of all others. Also, making it a full time position would be beneficial to the city of Madison. I know

Paul Skidmore 16:36

I'm opposed to a full time counsel, I'm opposed to cutting the numbers of alders, increasing the length of the term, and I'm opposed to increasing the salary to \$67,000 a year, which was the proposal. This would turn a representative democracy, which is what we have now into something else would be a professional council similar to Milwaukee, with some of the problems they have. You would see a doubling of the number of people that we serve; you'd have staff to hire that would have to be hired to manage the issues, and this was not reflective of what we heard in the Task Force Study. I was a member of that task force we met for two years 92 meetings, we averaged probably two or three people per meeting and we did not get overwhelming results. This is a recommendation from a small number of people that want to change the makeup of the Council, and I'm opposed to it.

Jennifer Ondrejka 17:40

Okay. The next question is, many of our Madison businesses have suffered because of the pandemic. A lot of places in Junction Ridge in fact have gone out of business. But our downtown businesses were doubly affected because of the vandalism that happened last summer. What should the city council do about this.

Paul Skidmore 18:13

Am I to start. Yes. Okay, thank you for the question. I support Alder Mike Verveer in his effort to provide funds to repair the damage, and we were met with a shocking response that the majority of the Council, and many in parts of the community, were opposed to it because they felt that that was racist, and that there was systemic racism and white supremacy that was ruling the downtown, and that dealt a very serious blow to the downtown State Street. The businesses there have suffered greatly. I think that 40 some have gone out of business. They're shuttered, and there is a fear about reopening now. I think

that we should have programs to support the businesses and we should also have an environment that is safe. We should have a public safety program that allows people to stay on there.

Jennifer Ondrejka 19:17

Okay, Nikki.

Nikki Conklin 19:21

Thank you for the question. I believe that we do need to invest in and empower downtown businesses to really rebuild it and bring that downtown city, Madison life that so many of us have known and grown to love. It's definitely a tourist attraction and brings in lots of money for the city and so rebuilding it and getting a backup to, it may be something different than we have ever imagined downtown to be. You know I think this is the opportunity to really build, build, build within the downtown community you know have more museums have more theaters, for local artists and things like that so I think it's time that we really just tried to re imagine downtown but really try to still invest in empower and uplift those businesses to be up and vital in thriving again in the downtown area.

Jennifer Ondrejka 20:28

The next question, and Nikki you'll go first on this one. The recent rash of burglaries has made district nine residents feel less safe. We've had I think three break ins just in this small area in Junction Ridge within the past six months. The perception of the residents is that the police won't do anything. If the perpetrators are minors, which they often are. What will you do to resolve this?

Nikki Conklin 21:05

Thank you for the question. As all there my views are really, we have to get to the root cause of the problem. If we keep putting band aids over the wounds without cleaning it out and fixing it is going to get infected again. So really getting to the root cause of the issues. We need to find out what's going on at home when people don't always have their basic needs met, they don't have all the things that they need at home, they tend to go outside and look for those things, you know people right now we're in an unprecedented time with this pandemic. And people are fighting to survive. And unfortunately, they're harming us citizens of District Nine and all the districts around this, the city of Madison so really investing into community based programs for children to get into is going to be very important for us to try to curb. Thank you.

Jennifer Ondrejka 22:07

And Paul.

Paul Skidmore 22:10

Yes, this is a very complex issue, and there are many components to finding solutions and finding solutions to root causes is a part of it. Part of it is also having accountability and solutions at a higher level. I talked to the municipal judges that deal with juveniles and they're very frustrated and I've talked to the sheriff. He's equally frustrated and I've had conversations with the District Attorney. It's very difficult when the police catch the perpetrators. Take them in to book them, and they're released with

their recognizance (?) sometimes (789?) times, and they're laughing when they leave, it's very difficult

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to take this very seriously when the juveniles know that they're going to walk, and this is a problem and it's not there are many causes to it but we have to look at it.

Jennifer Ondrejka 23:16

Okay. On a related issue and Paul you'll go first. There are many definitions of defunding the police. What does defunding mean to you. And what is your position on it?

Paul Skidmore 23:36

Ah, good question. There's a narrative going around that we need to defund the police, there are at least two alders on the Council, who said they're not interested in defunding, they want to abolish the police force. And their well entrenched defunding can mean not providing more facilities, but there are more funds to continue operations. Right now there's a big deficit in the budget under most studies. Operational studies the police department are underfunded to the point where they're 30 positions short of having minimum staffing levels for patrol officers, and you can't take away much more before they're functionally useless right now they're on basically a response to calls, there's very little time to do proactive policing. That's a fact.

Jennifer Ondrejka 24:39

Okay. Nikki.

Nikki Conklin 24:42

Yes, thank you. Um, I think, really, that defund the police is a made up word because really we know that that could never happen. I have relationship with officers. I've spoken to many public safety workers, and they have all said, you know that they're overworked and, and they're getting calls and going to certain situations that they're not most necessarily needed That's why, as all there I would focus on having trained mental health crisis responders, having the correct professionals going to the right jobs, social workers. ADA services and mental health crisis I will support that. We're starting a pilot program of the CAHOOTS program that's been successful in Eugene, Oregon for 30 plus years and I'm excited to see how that's going to benefit Madison, Wisconsin.

Jennifer Ondrejka 25:45

Okay. Thank you. The next two questions actually are related to population density and housing. The first question and I think Nikki, you go first on this one. Proposed housing regulations will increase the population density in Madison. At the same time, the regulations will diminish citizens' input on housing development. Do you support these proposed regulations, and if not, how should they be amended.

Nikki Conklin 26:26

That's a great question. Well, for the second part I don't think that the constituents should not have a say in the developments that are going up and around in our district. I believe that having the community input is very important. I also believe that when we say that we're making affordable

housing, that's affordable for all not just certain socio-economic classes. I also believe that we need to focus on tenant rights. When making. Excuse me. When doing affordable housing. People need to know their rights as well. I believe that that's very important. I also believe that we need, if we want to

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really try to combat the homelessness issue I think we need to focus on more programs like housing first programs that get your basic needs met in your house, and then you can focus on other issues.

Jennifer Ondrejka 27:30

Thank you.

Paul Skidmore 27:33

Thank you and I interpret the your question as, as it relates to the current proposal that would allow certain housing types to be permitted without public input, I believe that I agree that that's not a good idea and that the public should be able to have input on these types of decisions on density and housing in particular. I'm in favor of fewer regulations that you know constrict development which could help the city grow and provide housing. We have about a 1% vacancy rate which we do have a serious deficiency in all types of housing, particularly affordable housing. So we know we do need to have better opportunities for growth, but by restricting public input is not a good idea.

Jennifer Ondrejka 28:32

Thank you. Okay, the next question is also about population density and the ensuing traffic problems that are increasing all over Madison. These problems have already affected the quality of life here in Junction Ridge, and the city's Junction Ridge Development Plan calls for adding a shopping mall in this neighborhood and tripling the number of residents. What should the city council do to ensure pedestrian safety, provide adequate parking, and design mass transit in light of the oncoming pressure? Paul.

Paul Skidmore 29:21

That's a lot to cover in one minute but I'll try. A mistake was made many years ago, when Junction Ridge or Junction Road was designed to be able to accommodate traffic that will probably accommodate 50 miles per hour, and you can't go back on that but there needs to be traffic calming. There needs to be ways to slow the traffic down and ways to safely get people across the street. Number two, the big surprise or secret, people are not talking about is, we have a transit desert in the ninth district, if you look past Junction Ridge, there's very little bus service to the west, and yet we're pumping many millions of dollars into a bus rapid transit system that we haven't even tested yet and I have a great problem with that. And I think that those moneys could be better used to provide more transit for more people and traffic management in neighborhoods like Junction Ridge.

Jennifer Ondrejka 30:26

Thank you. This is too much for a minute. Maybe we can tack on 30 seconds. Okay, Nikki.

Nikki Conklin 30:39

Thank you again. With building any type of new developments, you know, what really needs to be in place of safety for all. Yes, we need to have speed bumps in there, we need to have enough parking

lots and parking spaces underground parking. When putting up these new developments we need to make sure that there's local healthy food access. We need to make sure that there's clean drinking water in these new developments and then also being environmentally justice, environmentally safe, do

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you know when we're putting in new developments are these solar powered, energy efficient buildings. We know that by the year, 2050, most things are going to be electric fired, hopefully, and we need to make sure that we have proper infrastructures in place. And, all while protecting our residents. When we have new developments going up. So, yeah,

Jennifer Ondrejka 31:42

Thank you. Okay, this question is about neighborhoods, trying to work with the city. It takes a very long time to get the city to make even small improvements in a neighborhood or allow the Neighborhood Association to just go ahead and make the improvements. For an example, some years back, the Junction Ridge Neighborhood Association worked with the city for a long time to find out all of the requirements around putting up signage; the signage was finally designed and all set. And they submitted the plan, and waited 18 months to get the approval. We appreciate that the city has to have quality control, and there are liability issues and all of those things, but surely, there must be some way to speed these things up and be more responsive to the neighborhoods. So what is that way? Nikki.

Nikki Conklin 32:54

Well that's a great question. First of all, second of all, you know, I cannot speak on that issue yet, you know, as a newcomer coming in. I have many, many alders, both former and current alders who have already endorsed me and are ready to work beside me to guide me to lead me in the right direction of what I need to learn and what I need to know so I can't really say unfortunately at this moment what the city can do to speed up the process to make this more accommodating for folks to actually get things done. And my own experiences, I can speak to that I know that everything takes time but you need people power and it sounded like you guys had that people power and together, you got in front of the person that you wanted to ask, you sent the ask to the city to get things done. Unfortunately they might have just dropped the ball, you know, maybe they were going through things, they didn't have proper staffing, so everything we in turn need to understand that everything is in a full motion circle, you know one person scratches the other person's back. But for me, I'm ready and willing and able to learn how I can help most fastly get things done.

Jennifer Ondrejka 34:17

Thank you.

Paul Skidmore 34:21

Thank you for the softball. I was asked this but I didn't think it would be here. This is a pet peeve and has been for about 30 years. I joke about this with Mayor Soglin and he laughed a lot and he said good luck, you're on your own. On a good day, the city is incredibly slow and what you're experiencing is typical. We've talked about this and this was supposed to be one of our major issues to decrease this but we punted on it, and that's because it was too big of an issue. The city had over 100 committees, commissions and boards, over 100 additional Task Force workgroups and such. We suffer from analysis paralysis. You can't make a decision, and the drag on for months and months, it could take 18 months or more for a good development. This is not unusual, and it's a systemic problem that we have

to, to address time.

Jennifer Ondrejka 35:30

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Our last question is how you will keep your constituents aware of and involved in topics that are coming before the council, and how you make yourself available to your constituents.

Paul Skidmore 35:48

Thank you. Um, this has been a long term evolving issue, back in the day when I was first elected, we, we had, email, basically that was it and no social media, and we knocked on doors, we went to neighborhood meetings annual meetings, and I went to a lot of them, including Junction Ridge and Blackhawk and others. Now we have performed. And I'm adjusting to them. I'm using my website, developed a blog, and I'm still connecting via phone and email, a lot has been difficult with COVID. And it's also been difficult as we grow and things get more complex, many new layers. Right now, like, just before the meeting I got a call from the police precinct about shots fired on Gammon Road, I'm getting a lot of that having to notify Neighborhood Association presidents in time.

Jennifer Ondrejka 36:51

Nikki.

Nikki Conklin 36:54

Yes, um, as I've been running this campaign for me this is something totally new but social media has totally ran my whole campaign. So I will be available on all social media platforms you can follow me at Nikki for District Nine the number four, the number nine. Also I have a website Nikki.vote, where I have my phone number and my email address it. Address posted folks are able to reach out to me, they can call me at any time. I myself have been making phone calls to hundreds of people within this district, connecting with them that way. Also texting and email lists, have been very popular in my campaign. I plan to win I am honored to have set up monthly zoom meetings until we are able to safely meet in person then I plan to have a spot where I can meet monthly with constituents for open office hours to come talk to me anytime they want to so I'm available, I'm here.

Jennifer Ondrejka 37:59

Thank you. Okay. That concludes the questions that people have sent in. So you will each have three minutes to wrap up and say good evening.

Nikki Conklin 38:20

All right. Thank you, everybody. Thank you, Jennifer, thank you Lynn for hosting this Thank you Junction Ridge for coming on and listening to us and giving us this opportunity to speak and allow you to kind of introduce ourselves and meet us a little bit more if you don't already know us. I just really want to say that I am excited, and I'm so grateful for this opportunity to be in this position, my community has really invested in me they have empowered me to be right here in front of you today to say that I am running for alder. I know the importance of community funded programs, community based programs. When you're able to empower and uplift one another we all rise together. If we want our communities to be thriving, we need to make sure that our basic needs are met, housing,

employment, education, our children, our future if we don't invest in them and uplift them. They're not going to have a very good life, and we're not going to have a very good life so it's really important that as you're all there that we, as you're all there I will focus on my whole safety plan. And when I say my safety plan every letter of safety spells out something so with the S we have solar powered and energy

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efficient buildings, when they're being built afford A affordable housing and tenant rights, I will focus on F is for food justice and clean water, E is for equitable access to health care, T for trained mental health crisis responders, and Y youth educational opportunities. All these areas are so important to me, and all these areas should be so important for everyone else because when we have all these bases covered. We are going to have a healthier community and healthier communities, equals safer communities, community building projects are in partnerships are so important for us. We need to be able to make sure that we're meeting people's needs, and we also need to focus on climate change. Environmental Justice because all of these things wrapped into one is going to make us safer. So I want to thank you guys once again for giving me this opportunity, and hopefully I'm going to be earning your support. By April 6. For more information please visit my website at (Nikki that boat).Nikki dot vote. Thank you.

Jennifer Ondrejka 40:59

Thanks. Hmm.

Paul Skidmore 41:03

Well, I want to thank you all for the opportunity to be your alder for the last two years, and the previous 18 as well. I learned a lot from you. I have become friends with many of you, and I've enjoyed doing the projects in Junction Ridge park on Elderberry and Attic Angels and fill in the blank I've been doing a lot, working with people, hand in hand, and participating with you to grow and keep your neighborhood safe. I do feel that I have worked hard to understand the issues and the problems, and I work with staff, very well to correct the problems when I see them and to get things done either above the radar or below the radar. You know that there's a lot that goes on. But I gotta tell you my, my primary focus right now is public safety because that's the biggest concern that I'm hearing throughout the district, our neighborhoods are not safe. What can we do to make them safe? There was some discussion about traffic. There are a lot more traffic problems right now, because in reality, police are not making traffic stops. It's not a priority, they don't have the resources to do it and quite frankly if you look around and see the number of officers that are being murdered, when they're ambushed around the country, patrol officers are very reluctant to make patrol stops. That's a problem, and that there are some serious issues related to the protest. It is a very tense time downtown there are protests almost daily down there I keep apprised of what's going on and what's happening. We do have some serious issues and there was some discussion about the department being overstaffed. That's completely wrong and that is a false narrative. Chief Koval transferred a lot of the proactive police officers that were serving the neighborhoods, the neighborhood officers and Mental Health Officers, when the city council refused to adequately fund the department, he was transferring officers from, from their specialty units, over into patrol. Finally when it ran out he resigned, he retired and disgusted, and I don't blame him. And that morale is not good. Staffing levels are very low. We do have a crisis in public safety and to me that is job number one, but there's a lot else going on. We have a lot of great opportunities, told you I'm a landscape architect. I lived in Tamarac for the last 18 years, and I have lived in the district for 30 plus years, and I love the city, and I've been working hard to make it a better place to live throughout and

that's what I hope to do in the next two years as your alder, thank you very much for having us.

Jennifer Ondrejka 44:11

Thank you, Paul. Well thanks to both of you for sharing your evening with us, and thanks to everybody who signed on to listen to this, appreciate everybody's involvement.