



Below is the unedited questionnaire of:

**Amir Farokhi**  
Atlanta City Council  
District 2



### 2017 Candidate Pre-Interview Questionnaire

1. Describe briefly your qualifications for this office. In addition, please identify up to 5 organizations or individuals who are actively supporting your candidacy and why you believe their support is important.

My qualifications for this office arise from both my professional and civic experience. Professionally, my experience both as an attorney and public policy non-profit founder (GeorgiaForward) has given me the skillset necessary for legislative drafting and navigating an array of pressing policy issues (from economic development to education), even among disparate parties, whether government, private sector, higher ed., or civil society. Moreover, I have served as COO of a \$32 million national non-profit and, as a result, have a strong understanding of running a business responsibly and transparently all while building a supportive but high-performance culture. Civically, I have served on the boards of transportation (Atlanta Bicycle Coalition), education (Drew Charter School), and public safety (Atlanta Fire Foundation) organizations, giving me deep understanding of pressing policy challenges. Moreover, my experiences in LEAD (2006) and Leadership Atlanta (2013) give me further relationships and issue understanding to be effective in this role.

Among the individuals and organizations that are actively supporting my candidacy are:

1. **Campaign Co-Chairs: Jason Carter**, a mentor and District 2 resident, Jason has been instrumental in communicating with voters about my campaign. **Ann Cramer**, a longtime mentor, well-respected voice in our City and District resident. **Rukiya Thomas** and **Glen Paul Freedman**, who are both important for their transportation knowledge and LGBT advocacy, respectively, round out my campaign co-chairs.
2. **State legislators: Stacey Abrams, David Dreyer, Pat Gardner, Stacey Evans, Elena Parent, Scott Holcomb** - Each of these elected officials who are supporting me have done so because they believe I know how to get things done and that I have the disposition and ability to build a consensus to serve the District well.
3. **Atlanta Fire Fighters Union (IAFF Local 134)** - This endorsement and support is important because it affirms my deep commitment to making sure our city leads the Southeast in how we approach public safety, from training to action.
4. **AFSCME** - The endorsement of the largest union of city workers is important to my campaign for the canvassing support they will provide as well as the affirmation of my message that we can deliver more efficient city services while also taking care of our workers.

5. **Rev. Raphael Warnock** pastors a historic church in the heart of District 2, and I'm proud to count him among my active supporters. We both believe that government cannot succeed without compassion. As a prominent spiritual leader and frequent contributor to Atlanta's political discourse, Rev. Warnock has given thoughtful counsel on any number of issues, and he is a strong and recognizable endorser who will help my campaign reach the faith community
  
2. What is your vision for the City of Atlanta and how would you implement it? Please be specific.

District 2 is the heart of our City: economically, culturally, and historically. My vision for the District can be applied to Atlanta as a whole: a livable city that continues to be the economic and cultural engine of the Southeast and that generates and competes with the world's best cities for talent. To do so, we must prudently invest to augment our transit network, improve city services and transparency, grow our people, and provide affordability for all who live here. Specific initiatives to realize this vision include:

- A commitment to the allocation of TSPLOST funds to promote walkability, bike infrastructure, and maintenance of key roads/lights to improve traffic flow.
- Digitization of city services to improve customer service, reduce costs of service delivery, and build trust with residents. Incentivize dense transit oriented-development while strengthening the tree ordinance to maintain the tree canopy over our neighborhoods.
- Inclusionary zoning for 20-80% AMI on Beltline overlay, density bonuses near transit, and increased tax abatements for seniors.
- Collaborate with the Chamber of Commerce, Invest Atlanta, and local VCs to ensure our region attracts the capital needed to support small and medium-sized businesses.
- Use Invest Atlanta incentives to grow our film, music, bioscience, or B2C and B2B technology sectors, further diversifying our economy.

3. Please identify the three greatest issues or problems facing the City of Atlanta and specifically how you would work to solve them.

1. **Transportation:** We cannot achieve our full economic and human potential as a region if we do not provide more transportation options for our residents. Building out our transit infrastructure and creating nodes of dense, mixed-use development accessible by transit will help address affordability in the City, economic development, corporate recruitment, and quality of life. Traffic is a reality of every successful city; however, Atlanta's growth and quality of life depends on providing options for residents to not use a car if they prefer. To do so, we must commit TSPLOST funds to projects that will enhance access to jobs and housing in a multi-modal fashion and work closely with MARTA to ensure their system growth is both equitable and goes where we need it to

- (i.e., job and residential centers). I will advocate for expanding transit in District 2 (e.g., streetcar extension on North Ave) and for development that is not as car-centric.
2. **Education:** Our potential is limited as a region and City if we do not do a better job educating our people. We cannot alone rely on those educated outside the region to drive our economy. To do so, city government must work more closely with APS as well as corporate and non-profit communities to close achievement gaps. In District 2, my mission is that every child who grows up in the Boulevard housing cluster has access to best-in-class early childhood health care and education. When children arrive for their first day of school, we want them prepared, excited to learn, and on the same level as their peers. Having served on the board of the Charles R. Drew Charter School in East Lake for nearly ten years, I understand both the power of early childhood education AND the leverage outside partnerships can provide to raise the bar for both teachers and students at a school. I will champion these partnerships in my District and across the City. Finally, having run a \$30M+ national education non-profit focused on college access for low-income students, I am ready to work to ensure that the kids in District 2, through Achieve Atlanta and other partnerships, matriculate to secondary education.
  3. **Affordability:** As Atlanta grows, so too does the cost of living, especially in District 2. It is an undeniable and unfortunate fact that it's becoming harder and harder for working-and-middle class Atlantans to find a place to live in District 2. This affordability challenge requires a broad policy approach that includes increasing the supply of affordable housing stock, protecting senior homeowners, increasing access to transportation, and ensuring proximity to jobs, shopping, and healthcare. In addition to the transportation priorities listed above, I believe we need to prioritize affordable housing in several ways: more housing density in areas with access to transit (including reducing parking requirements for developments near MARTA train stations), inclusionary zoning for 20-80% AMI in the Beltline overlay & where there has been significant public investment, protecting and boosting the "missing middle" housing stock, lobbying to increase the homestead exemption for those over 65, and exploring density bonuses along major corridors.

4. As a City Council member, how would you manage collaborating with your colleagues on difficult citywide issues versus representing your own constituents?

I suspect this tension will be present even within my District, which includes the CBD, sites of international importance, tourist destinations, the densest residential core of the city, all of which are bordered by single family neighborhoods.

My approach is that I vote my district and my conscience first and foremost. Fundamentally, I believe that the people of District 2 understand that our livability does not have to come at the expense of citywide success. I also know that District 2 residents often see the big picture as much as they care about what is happening on their block.

Additionally, my style, which is honest, thoughtful, and collaborative, will allow me to build trust with my colleagues and constituents such that if I have to take a position unpopular with either, it will be communicated clearly after full engagement from all parties...and that will ultimately allow one to make tough decisions without alienating one group for a long period of time.

5. How do you view the City of Atlanta's financial position? Should the City of Atlanta have additional tools in place to ensure financial management going forward?

Mayor Reed deserves credit for building the City's reserves to \$175 million and for reestablishing a AAA bond credit rating for Atlanta. However, we must be mindful not to squander our reserves and to commit to provide a greater fiscal transparency to residents. Maintaining a healthy financial reality requires constant vigilance.

To ensure sound financial management going forward, we should explore:

- Reducing our long term obligations as a percentage of total revenues, which are over 300% right now. One approach: research buyouts to reduce unfunded pension liabilities.
- A user-friendly, modern, interactive website that shows each department's budget and expenditures, updated monthly. Requirement: Full transparency on Councilmembers budget and expenditures.
- A full external audit every 2-3 years to supplement and confirm the work of the City Auditor's Office.
- Explore increased parking rates to generate more income, especially from non-residents, and incentivize transit use.
- Ensuring that the City is collecting all sales and property tax due to it.

6. Please describe your philosophy regarding property tax assessments and municipal taxation.

Current property tax assessments have threatened the affordability of many neighborhoods in Atlanta, especially in District 2. Even if actual property values have risen significantly in recent years, there should be a cap on the percentage increase that is permitted each year. The City should lobby the State for this change. Moreover, Fulton County should begin to conduct assessments on a more involved and regular basis to accurately reflect property values rather than adjusting every 3-5 years. Additionally, we must be mindful of working to allow those with fixed incomes to stay in their homes. To ensure seniors can age in place, we should lobby for a larger homestead exemption for those over 65 and explore a reduction in property tax on seniors by reducing the amount that goes to public schools (for seniors only and only with strong analysis that schools will not suffer).

Our sales tax is among the highest in the country. Yet, given that City residents, through property taxes, pay a disproportionate amount toward city services that serve tens of thousands of non-Atlantans every day, our sales tax components are well placed. The TSPLOST, MARTA, and MOST components of our 8.9% sales tax rate are critical to addressing our infrastructure backlog and future demands. If permitted by the state, I am also in favor of a 1/10 penny tax that would be dedicated for the arts. I am wary of a sales tax rate that climbs higher than 9% in the coming five years but am supportive of our current sales tax rate insofar as Atlanta voters determine the amount and the purpose.

We must also be vigilant and thoughtful to investigate new revenue streams, to increase the share that non-residents bear, as well as increasing efficiency in City operations to reduce costs internally. I'm happy to talk further about ideas for both.

7. What is your opinion of Atlanta's MOST, and what approach do you support to fund long-term water and sewer operations?

Across the country, cities are grappling with high investment needs and limited resources for water and sewer operations, as well as infrastructure generally. The EPA notes that the nation may need as much as \$655 billion in water infrastructure investment over the next 20 years. As noted above, I am in favor of the MOST portion of our sales tax because (1) we need it to stay compliant with federal mandates; (2) we need near-constant investment in our water and sewer infrastructure; and (3) it spreads the cost burden beyond city residents who pay high property taxes and water rates. As we look to the future, we should continue to have honest conversations around the need for MOST when it comes up for renewal. Ideally, we can reduce the sales tax burden but our long-term infrastructure needs are paramount.

Moreover, although our water/sewer operations have a decent operating ratio, our water/sewer operations debt-to-asset ratio is higher than most cities. This is likely due to our investment in infrastructure that many other cities have yet to undertake. Yet, as we look to the future, we can reduce costs by coordinating water management across all city departments and being proactive

in investing in capital improvements to match population growth and demands on the system. Los Angeles has developed a comprehensive water plan that does this and could be instructive for us. We must also look to reduce residential and commercial consumption, promote sustainable building efforts (like the Better Buildings Challenge), and explore public-private partnerships to meet our infrastructure needs.

8. Would you change the current procurement process to protect against “pay to play”? If so, what changes would you support?

Yes. I would support the following:

1. Banning bids from contractors who have been disqualified or barred in another jurisdiction.
2. Conducting regular cross-checks of City employees and bidder employees to ensure there is no overlap or self-interest.
3. Independent third-party approval of procurement decisions in emergency scenarios.
4. Strengthening conflict of interest provisions to require disclosure of assets, previous employment & paid positions outside the public service for procurement employees.
5. Explore reverse bidding through which any potential contractor may bid for the most competitive price at which to sell their service to the city.
6. Explore banning all contractor political contributions one year before bidding and limit successful bidders to \$250 candidate contributions after that with aggregate total limit contributions from a corporation holding a city contract of \$2,600 annually.
7. Increasing transparency of the procurement process by making all bids, bidder background, and decision criteria publicly available in an easy-to-use online portal; and inviting civil society groups to monitor the process.
8. Engage the Sunlight Foundation to revamp our procurement policy.
9. Restricting contact between bidders and city employees/evaluation committee; make all communications public immediately; rotate procurement officials in sensitive positions, if possible.
9. If elected, describe your role in ensuring ethical and transparent management of City resources by City employees?

As a Councilmember, I will hold City officials, departments, and myself to a high standard of transparency with respect to expenditures. This may take the form of questions of those who come before Council and its committees, legislation that requires disclosure of information that might traditionally be withheld from the public (such as number of department employees working overtime or a regular report on the use of city vehicles), as well being fully transparent on the use of my office's funds and how I spend my own time.

Council should be an active voice in pushing the City to raise the bar with respect to being a good steward of City resources. But that talk is only meaningful if I act accordingly in my own office.

10. What economic development strategies would you prioritize to ensure the City of Atlanta captures its fair share of future job growth?

While we should continue to pursue companies who want to relocate to Atlanta, most private sector jobs are homegrown. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities found that 87% of private sector jobs created from 1995-2013 came from "in-state businesses, created by startups, entrepreneurs, or the expansion of employment at existing companies." Accordingly, we need to invest less in subsidies to lure big company relocations and focus on our entrepreneurs as well as support and retain businesses that already call Atlanta home.

Given our world-class higher education, corporate, and startup ecosystem, we should:

- Ensure companies have access to the talent pool they need to thrive, in part, by facilitating partnerships with our higher education institutions;
- Pitch the Chamber of Commerce, Invest Atlanta, and local VCs on the benefits of our region attracting the capital needed to support small and medium-sized businesses;
- Explore launching a city-run VC fund or an independently-managed fund specifically for District 2 businesses that will invest in promising startups and small companies focused in select areas including technology, healthcare, fashion, and B2C and B2B;
- Champion and connect those who are building the industries of the future, whether it be in film, music, bioscience, or B2C and B2B technology; and
- Work with APS, Achieve Atlanta, public & private post-secondary institutions, including technical colleges, to (a) ensure our qualified students find a college which meets their needs; (b) lobby the General Assembly to provide free technical college education for qualified students eager to learn a trade in a high-demand industry.

11. What strategies would you implement to ensure an adequate supply of affordable housing?

Atlanta's strength lies, in large part, with its social, generational, and economic diversity. As we grow, our city must remain a place where people of all incomes can find a home and build a sustainable life. Affordable housing is also an economic development and transportation issue. The closer one can live to their place of work, the more livable the city becomes for all of us and the more businesses can flourish with a reliable workforce. Among the strategies that I believe we should employ include:

- Inclusionary zoning that provides housing for those who earn 20-80% of Area Median Income ("AMI"), in areas where public investment has created the incentive for development (e.g., the Beltline overlay);



- Density bonuses along corridors that are appropriate for density (e.g., Ponce de Leon, Boulevard, Moreland). This will allow developers to build more units and more floors in exchange for more affordable housing units.
- Work with AHA and developers to ensure workforce housing for those making at or above slightly above AMI, an additional area of need in the city;
- Support tax abatements and expansion of the homestead exemption for seniors on fixed income;
- Support selling vacant city-owned land to true affordable housing developers;
- Explore the utility of a city affordable housing fund that developers can pay into to support development of affordable housing units (see, e.g., Los Angeles); and
- Protect and promote low-rise, "missing middle" apartments and allow accessory dwelling units.

12. What workforce development strategies should the next administration prioritize? How will these strategies address and improve economic mobility among low-to-mid skill workers?

Every person born in Atlanta should be able to build a meaningful and sustainable life here. To do so, we must create a strong cradle-to-college pipeline and cultivate careers for those without a college degree. Among the strategies we should prioritize include:

- Increased microfinancing for small, low-middle-income entrepreneurs;
- A program similar to the Evergreen Cooperative in Cleveland which, through partnerships with universities, hospitals, foundations, and city government, focused on catalyzing new businesses, owned by employees, and creating jobs and then recruiting and training local residents to fill them, rather than concentrating on workforce training for employment opportunities that are largely unavailable to low-skill and low-income workers. This program has had notable success in providing economic mobility and wealth creation in traditionally low-income communities. It has smartly leveraged the purchasing power of local institutions to help spark growth for these homegrown businesses. It is a model we should copy given our poor economic mobility.
- Set aside jobs related to TSPLOST-funded transit and infrastructure growth to low-income Atlantans ready to work.
- Establishment of "Financial Empowerment Centers," as employed in NYC, Philadelphia, and Nashville, to (1) mitigate the negative effect payday lenders have on low-income communities; and (2) build savings and reduce debt for low-income residents.

13. What are the three most important transportation/infrastructure projects that should occur in the City of Atlanta? Please rank them by importance and urgency and explain your reasoning.
1. The **Crosstown Midtown street car extension**. Transit that connects people to jobs, especially east-west connectivity is a massive need. This proposed streetcar extension runs across the middle of the city, from one side of the Beltline to the other: from Bankhead MARTA station across North Avenue to Ponce City Market. To be meaningful and connect to the existing streetcar, this would also require the Luckie Street extension. This Crosstown Midtown extension would fill a transit gap, connect *existing* residential centers on the west and east sides of the City with job centers in Downtown and Midtown, and tie into MARTA train stations. Built-in ridership/demand from the start, will do wonders to build momentum and use for the streetcar. And, alleviate traffic in town.
  2. **Clifton Corridor Light Rail Transit** to connect Emory/CDC to existing MARTA stations. One of our region's largest job centers should be accessible via transit. This would spur innovative TOD and reduce congestion in the northeast area of our city.
  3. **Pedestrian infrastructure**. We need safe, new sidewalks, new crosswalks, complete streets that encourage walking. We neglect our sidewalks in an alarming way, especially as more and more residents walk, age in place, and raise families in the City. In my view, neglect of this magnitude on basic services reinforces the assumption that City Hall cares little about the ordinary taxpayer. We can do better.

P.S. *Regional commuter rail* is of great importance and need but that's beyond the City of Atlanta's ability/authority.

14. What strategies would you pursue to improve the safety – both real and perceived – of all residents, visitors, and workers in Atlanta? What partnerships are needed to realize these strategies?

Public safety is a community effort. While APD and AFR are understaffed and underpaid (a compelling separate issue which requires our attention), the most effective policing is grounded in community involvement. Doing so requires fully engaged partnerships between schools, neighborhood organizations, hospitals, probation officials and businesses — so that police can make quality-of-life services and crime prevention a core part of their community policing approach. Moreover, these partnerships allow police to interact with residents outside of traditional law enforcement, building trust and reducing crime.

Additionally, APD's partnership with the Atlanta Police Foundation has been critical to leveraging the corporate community's support and in establishing a leading network of integrated security cameras. The City should actively support this work and partnership.

For the safety of residents, visitors, and workers, I'd also like to see APD:

1. Develop a nightlife division that is adept at interacting with people and ensuring safety in a subtle but effective manner;
  2. Build a flex squad and/or more quickly reassign officers to tackle hot spots of crime: prostitution in Midtown, muggings on the Beltline, etc.
  3. Continue to work with state government and Georgia State Patrol on approaches for cracking down on ATV use in the City.
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15. Georgia ranks 49th among states for per-capita arts funding. What actions would you take to ensure our arts and culture organizations have the funding they need to thrive and enrich our city?

Atlanta has one of the nation's most robust and successful creative ecosystems. Our cultural and economic might is, in significant part, due to our creatives. The City should do what it can to ensure that creatives can flourish and build a career here. Moreover, studies have shown that residents are more attached to their communities and communities are more economically successful where there is ample public art and great aesthetics. The arts engender joy, reflection, and inspiration within a city's built community. They lead us to love our city. Actions that I support include:

- Continuing to lobby the state to allow a 1/10 penny tax for dedicated arts funding. This can create a \$14M annual influx for arts organizations, large and small. By comparison, in 2015, the Office of Cultural Affairs disseminated roughly \$1 million.
- While we are lucky to have a generous corporate and philanthropic community which supports the arts, we must also look to our City budget to see if we can increase public funding for the arts; also, research an "arts tax" for hotel guests.
- A "percent for art" ordinance that both sets aside and collects 1% of City-funded construction projects be spent on public artwork AND that 1% of the construction cost of private development, receiving any public assistance, be set aside for on-site public art.