



Below is the unedited questionnaire response of:

Liliana Bakhtiari
Atlanta City Council
District 5



2021 Candidate Pre-Interview Questionnaire

Please type your response to questions in the field provided. Please limit answers to 300 words or less.

1. Briefly describe your qualifications for this office and why you have chosen to run. 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 name is Liliana Bakhtiari. I'm a longtime Southeast Atlanta homeowner and the daughter of immigrants, with a proven track record as a notable community leader, social justice advocate and activist working on a variety of initiatives. I have tackled initiatives locally including engaging suburban and rural voters during especially critical elections, direct services with unsheltered populations, blood drives, senior partnerships, public art initiatives, and more. In 2017, I ran for the same seat on the Atlanta City Council against a 16 year incumbent and received 49% of the vote. Since then, I served as the Public Affairs Manager of Planned Parenthood Southeast; I lobbied for voting rights with ProGeorgia; I served as a consultant for Echo Market Research as they built out their Social Justice Division; and I worked with Partners for Home to establish their hotel programs housing our at-risk unsheltered population during the COVID-19 pandemic. I currently serve as a curator of the Atlanta-based art organization Black Futures Matter, while also serving on the boards of PEDS, Georgia Equality, and gloATL. My candidacy is supported by Former CFO of the City Peter Aman, whose experience and mentorship has been invaluable in shaping my approaches to competent government; Beltline Founder Ryan Gravel, whose innovation and vision has shaped our city; Amol Naik, former Atlanta Chief Resilience Officer, whose guidance on sustainability policy has pushed us forward; Aaron Goldman of Perennial Properties, who has set an example in our city for affordable housing development; and Executive Director of the East Lake Foundation, Danny Shoy, who has created a model for community investment that supports our neighbors at all income levels, while promoting prosperity. I am honored to have earned each of their support, along with 40+ other endorsements and over 1500 individual donors to date.

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

The number one issue facing our city is Public Safety. With the number of homicides passing 100 this year alone we need both short-term tactics to address the spike in violent crime and long-term solutions to address the root causes of crime overall so that everyone feels safe regardless of income bracket, race, or zip code. I have organized with community leaders, and spoken with officers, solicitor generals, and local judges about practical solutions. Short term, we must hit our staffing targets and work to improve morale and personnel retention. Long term, we must diversify our public safety response teams to include un-armed traffic enforcement and non-emergent response teams for mental health and poverty response, require de-escalation training for all officers, and address recidivism through social programs, wrap around services, and diversion programs. The second is affordability. We need to actively work to increase the number of units of affordable housing in Atlanta and do a better job of addressing housing affordability across the spectrum including workforce development and housing, expanded services for our unsheltered population, and targeted tax credits and incentives. Third is infrastructure. Atlanta is growing quickly, but our infrastructure has not been updated to accommodate this growth. We need to catch up through bundling infrastructure updates, and leveraging federal dollars by ensuring that our infrastructure projects are shovel ready. As we update our streets, water infrastructure, and broadband, we must plan proactively with long-term sustainability and urban resilience in mind so that our infrastructure investments today, can withstand the trials of tomorrow.

3. Describe your leadership style and an example of a strategy you have used to motivate others and deliver results.

I have a proactive and collaborative leadership approach. During my time in the non-profit sector, I often worked in coalition with other organizations toward a common goal. Through coalition building, we can not only share the burden, but we can also share resources to address intersectional issues that too often end up in limbo as we simply try to determine who is responsible. Silos within city departments, and between local governments often stall our progress and eat up valuable resources. As our next councilmember, I will work to close the silos between city departments and establish clear lines of communication between Council, the Mayor's Office and the City Commissioners. Additionally, I will leverage my standing relationships with Fulton and DeKalb Commissioners, our State Officials, and our Congresspeople to build momentum behind initiatives within the City, and bring about results through collaboration.

4. Trust in the City’s service delivery and responsiveness is waning. What improvements would you make to these core service functions to restore public trust and improve quality of life for citizens and businesses in Atlanta?

Especially over the last year, due to COVID-19, we have seen gaps in staffing and lags in city services, but this is not a new issue. In order to restore public trust and deliver the city services that our residents are paying for through their tax dollars, we must bring accountability to our city departments. As our next councilmember, I will advocate for the creation of a closed loop system that allows for city service requests and public works tickets to be properly tracked. The technology already exists, and through public private partnerships with some of Atlanta’s resident tech companies, we can establish a publicly accessible system that is easy to navigate and provides agency to city residents. Additionally, we must use some of the ARP funds for hiring incentives to our city departments so that our city departments are fully staffed and equipped to serve our communities.

5. What are your views on the Buckhead cityhood movement? What actions will you take related to this issue?

As a citizen of Atlanta who has personally experienced the rise in violent crime and known some of the individuals who have fallen victim to homicides, I can absolutely understand the reasons behind the Buckhead cityhood movement. But as a candidate for council, I am against the cityhood movement. Not only will this fracture lead to losses in revenue and jobs for the City of Atlanta, but it will also place new financial and logistic burdens upon the proposed City of Buckhead. The effects of this fracture will inevitably lead to a downward spiral of the proximal smaller municipality on the doorstep of the other, which will only further exacerbate our standing issues. In effect, the cityhood movement cannot achieve the goals toward which it endeavors. That being said, I believe the Buckhead cityhood movement can be vital tool towards leveraging our council and our mayor to take substantive action in the areas of crime and city competency, forcing us to address the unbelievably high attrition rates amongst our first responders, and lacking infrastructure and support that has led to failing technology, police equipment, poor training, mold riddled fire houses, and beyond. I have already taken action as a private citizen and council candidate to build bridges within the Buckhead community, and spoken at length with both members of the cityhood movement and to those who oppose it. As our next councilmember, I will bring all of the stakeholders to the table and clearly lay out the economic and logistic implications of Buckhead secession, and demonstrate how a united Atlanta benefits all residents.

6. What is your philosophy on taxation in the City of Atlanta? What future funding streams do you believe are needed to pay for the things we need to grow? How should these opportunities be evaluated?

My overall taxation philosophy is based on the premise that taxes should be held to the lowest level needed to accomplish our city objectives and initiatives without undue burden being placed on any particular population. Our current taxation levels are roughly adequate, however due to expanded city offices and pandemic stressors, we have had to use one time funds to plug up holes and balance our budget. As our next councilmember, I will advocate for an audit of key expense areas to look for efficiencies and trim surplus budget expenses. Additionally, I will vote to renew our existing economic development tools for specific projects, such as the TSPLOST for regional transit initiatives and CIDs and TADs for local community investment and improvement. With public buy-in like these, we can remain competitive for federal dollars, and continue to attract business partners throughout the region.

7. If elected, describe your role in ensuring ethical and transparent management of City resources by City employees.

The City of Atlanta has made significant progress to restore public trust and integrity through the creation of the Office of Inspector General and hiring of the City's first Inspector General in 2020, and by requiring all councilmembers to publicly disclose their office finances in order to serve as committee chairs. If we hope to continue winning back public trust in the wake of city corruption scandals, we must continue to deepen transparency and demonstrate competency with city spending. As our next councilmember, I will push to prioritize transparency in our city procurement and contract bidding processes by disallowing political contributions to city officials from city contractors, and expand the scope of our Inspector General's power by granting them real subpoena power. I will push to broaden public disclosures, and work to establish a transparency mechanism for the city checkbook so that citizens can see how their tax dollars are being spent. And finally, I will advocate for establishing a lobbyist registry for the City of Atlanta, similar to that of the state. If elected, I intend to lead by example, by publicly sharing my office budget and will recuse myself from procurement votes should I encounter a conflict of interest.

8. Describe your philosophy as to the City of Atlanta's role in implementing public safety reform. Which strategies should be prioritized, and if elected, how will you work to advance them? What partnerships are necessary to achieving success?

Violent crime is up nearly 60% this year. We need both short-term tactics and long-term solutions to address the root causes of violent crime. As our next City Councilmember, first and foremost I will prioritize staffing and attrition. I will make sure that we hit our staffing targets across the board, including our firefighters, police, and 911 operators. We are budgeted and approved for 2,000 officers and 1,600 firefighters, but we currently have 1,600 officers and fewer than 1,000 firefighters. We need to be sure that these funded positions are filled. Additionally, I will strengthen step increases for our first responders and double workforce housing for first responders so that we can tackle attrition rates to keep officers in the communities that they serve. I will insist on new de-escalation training to decrease incidents of excessive force, and will work with organizations like PAD (Policing Alternatives and Diversion) to expand and diversify our public safety operations into a fully formed Public Safety Department, including 24/7 mental health and poverty response teams who can remove that burden from our patrol officers. I will push for the creation of a Diversion Center in place of the Atlanta City Detention Center that can divert non-violent individuals out of the criminal justice system and provide them with the resources they need. I will work directly with the community to develop a community policing plan that gives agency to our neighbors and decreases the need for police presence over time, so that APD's focus can remain on violent offenders and traffic safety. And finally, I know the best antidote to crime is providing a pathway to job security and housing security, which is why I will advance initiatives that invest in workforce development and housing development.

9. What role should diversion and policing alternatives play in the City's broader public safety strategy? How are these programs evaluated and funded?

The data shows us that close to half of 911 calls are non-emergent and do not need to be handled by an armed officer. Through police alternative programs, we have the potential to relieve the burden of non-emergent police response from our patrol officers so that they can focus on violent crime and emergent situations. Additionally, diversion programs can reduce the burden on our overcrowded Fulton County jail by diverting non-violent first time offenders, mental health crises, and impoverished individuals away from the our prison center and toward stabilizing resources. Diversion programs like these are not only more socially responsible, but are often more financially sound. For example, on average, every dollar invested in drug treatment yields \$12 worth of savings in terms of reducing future crime and health care expenses. As our next councilmember, I would support a formal city contract for PAD (Police Alternatives and Diversion) so that it can be properly evaluated, and funded. We can acquire upstart funding through multiple sources and private partners, and will keep that funding outcome focused. By tracking by-person and by-expense what kind of offenders are successfully diverted and the effects on recidivism, we can continue to evaluate these programs on a rolling basis. I am confident that we will find that over time these programs will offset our carceral costs and effectively pay for themselves.

10. What role should the City of Atlanta play in economic development? What is your perspective on urban redevelopment tools as the City competes for jobs, talent, and its share of economic growth?

The City of Atlanta is growing exponentially, and in order to harness that growth we need development tools that enable us to compete with other major cities for business expansion and relocation prospects, promising us more jobs, an expanded tax base, and even capital investments into much needed urban development plans. Through targeted use of incentives, we can continue our substantial economic development, however, as our next councilmember, I will advocate for a clear process for vetting these incentives. Through smart investment, Atlanta has become a desirable place to live and do business. We must recognize our worth, and strike a balance when awarding tax incentives, reserving them for more competitive bids and large scale business contracts. But these development prospects will not come here unless we develop a healthy workforce. By partnering with the Atlanta Technical College, the Center for Workforce Innovation, and our local unions, and encouraging Atlanta Public Schools to invest in STEAM education as well as vocational training, we can cultivate a desirable workforce here in Atlanta that meets recruitment needs at every level. This workforce can also foster competency within our city offices through strategic recruitment. As our next councilmember, I would advocate for the creation of a Chief Talent Officer for the City of Atlanta to assist with recruiting and retaining talent in the city. For too long, the city has functioned as “the employer of last resort.” If we hope to maintain our economic success, we need to cultivate city departments driven by ability and competency at all levels of employment. This must include active recruitment and executive training programs as we face a shortage of leadership level talent, as well as skill-trade and workforce development providing pathways for upward mobility for hard working Atlantans.

11. What role should the City of Atlanta play in addressing economic mobility and the racial wealth gap? Which tools and strategies would your office advance, if elected?

Atlanta has earned several undesirable signifiers in recent years. “Worst city to live on minimum wage” and “Largest income gap in the country” are just a few of our unfortunate titles just in the last year. In order to begin addressing these gaps in economic mobility, we need to focus on root causes and practical solutions. This starts with caring for our kids. As our next councilmember, I will support our education non-profits like COR and Purpose Built to provide wrap-around services for children and families experiencing poverty or hardship. Additionally, I broker partnerships between our local unions, Atlanta Public Schools, and YouthBuilds programs to establish vocational and trade-skill training beginning in middle school so that we can provide our students with pathways toward economic mobility from a young age. Additionally, I will continue to partner with our local non-profits like the West Side Futures Fund and work to replicate its model of philanthropic investment in BIPOC and impoverished communities to extend affordable housing options, workforce development, and community care initiatives to all of our city neighborhoods that need it. And finally, I will advocate for equity drivers like small business grants for BIPOC individuals and down payment assistance so that families can begin building generational wealth.

12. As we emerge from the pandemic, what are the major challenges facing the City for economic recovery? How will your candidacy address them?

As we enter a new COVID-19 surge, it is crucial that we have strategies in place to support the hardest hit industries that drive our city and state economies through innovative relief tools, stimulus funding and improved communication. For our hospitality industry, this means securing and continuing to attract economy bolstering events, like the potential FIFA World Cup in 2026. For our food service industry, that means streamlining permitting processes and waiving license fees as they recover, expanding outdoor dining capacity through parklet programs and reduced parking requirements, and permanently extending alcohol sales for off-site consumption. And for our arts industry, we must create and sustain artist grant programs and bolster arts venues that not only drive our cultural competency as an international city, but also our economy with an average ROI of \$4 for every dollar invested. As our next councilmember, I will seek to expand accessibility to the SBA's Emerging Leaders Initiative to directly support our small business owners and provide them with new tools to succeed. I will commit to the expansion of our City's existing grants for BIPOC and legacy owned businesses, and will work with neighborhood leaders to expand our Main Street program to support small businesses within our neighborhood commercial districts, distributing economic access throughout the city. As our next councilmember, I am committed to strengthening economic development tools that catalyze private market investment, attract new jobs, and protect and procure local funding for community development.

13. What strategies would you implement to improve the City's supply of affordable housing? What are the barriers to succeeding on this front and how will you work to overcome them?

While Atlanta is rapidly growing, we are currently building at a 20,000 unit deficit leading to skyrocketing housing costs and a lack of diversity in our housing stock. We need to be building faster and we need to be building a wider variety of housing options so that we can house the influx of new Atlanta residents as well as maintaining our city's greatest attributes. Our two greatest barriers to success are financing low-income housing when there is a clear cap on ROI for developers, and public buy-in as we increase density in certain areas of the city. One of the simplest solutions I will advocate for is streamlining the permitting process for projects meeting affordability criteria. By limiting the loopholes developers must jump through, we save them time and money. Additional incentives I would consider include density bonus programs, as well as linkage fees allocated to a designated affordable housing fund, and continued partnership with organizations like the Atlanta Land Bank and Partnership for Southern Equity who are already doing incredible work on this front. Additionally, we must motivate greater density along MARTA corridors and major by-ways according to our city funded CDP. This will help us maintain neighborhood character while addressing urgent housing needs. And finally, we should consider using our vacant public lands for affordable housing. As our next councilmember, I will support a policy similar to California's Surplus Land Act, with an open bidding process to develop public lands for residential use, giving first priority to residential developments with a high percentage of affordable or mixed-income units. To achieve all of this and keep it on track, as our next councilmember I will support the creation of a cabinet-level housing position to oversee the implementation and execution of our housing plans.

14. What strategies would you implement to protect residents from being displaced from their communities, as housing prices continue to rise and eviction moratoriums expire?

As our city grows, none of us want to see our neighbors displaced. Especially over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen eviction moratoriums and emergency rent assistance programs, but tenants rights issues will last long past the span of the pandemic and we will likely be facing a huge eviction crisis in the coming months once the new CDC moratorium is lifted. In preparation, I have been working with attorneys from the Atlanta Volunteer Lawyers Foundation to find solutions around free access to counsel for both tenants facing evictions and homeowners facing foreclosure whose income falls beneath an established threshold. Additionally, I would advocate for expansion of homeowner tax credits for seniors and legacy homeowners, cap annual property tax growth through a tax exemption based on income bracket, and increase accessibility to these credits and exemptions through tech partnerships with Microsoft and Code for America creating an online portal to determine eligibility and streamline applications.

15. What improvements, if any, need to be made to transparency and oversight on the More MARTA program? How should candidates for city appointments to the MARTA board be vetted and approved?

Currently, the IGA between MARTA, The Atlanta Beltline, and the City gives authority over the More MARTA program solely to the MARTA Board. While their committees answer to the Mayor, there is no re-evaluation process or accountability process should the Board fail to execute the More MARTA initiatives according to budget and plan. I will advocate for all city appointments to the MARTA board be vetted by the Office of the Inspector General and voted on by the full City Council. I would also advocate for personal financial disclosures for MARTA Board appointees, and would disqualify candidates who had contributed an aggregate \$1000 to the Mayor within the last 2 years, or who currently hold city contracts. It is important that we ensure that MARTA Board members are not buying their way onto this influential board, or receiving the position out of special interest. Finally, we need clear benchmarks for the More MARTA program complete with an accountability framework that enables enforcement, with consequences including re-evaluation of funding and potential dismissal of steering board members.

16. Describe your philosophy on the City's current infrastructure backlog. If elected, what strategies will you pursue to ensure forward progress is made? How would you expedite project delivery in the City?

Our city's infrastructure backlog is embarrassing. We are nearly \$2B behind, and have years worth of improvements that need to be urgently attended to. Any city that wishes to improve its fiscal health and continue attracting world class economic growth, we must invest in our foundational infrastructure, including roads, stormwater, and broadband. There are several small strategies I will advocate for that can begin to expedite our infrastructure updates, and bring us up to speed on new technology. First, I will leverage my relationships with state legislators to provide categorical exclusion for bicycling and pedestrian infrastructure to speed up the process by eliminating the delays caused by the EPA. Next, I will push ADOT and Public Works to bundle ADA and public sidewalk improvements with adjacent resurfacing projects so that we can address multiple needs simultaneously and minimize street closure duration. Third, I will compel City Council to allocate funds for design/preliminary planning to get projects to the shovel ready phase, which will make more projects eligible for funding coming down the federal pipeline. This last point is particularly timely as we anticipate significant federal funding opportunities from the recent Biden Jobs Plan. And finally, I will support the creation of a separate office to track the funding and execution of our infrastructure projects. In the past, Atlanta has experienced funding irregularities and misuse that has exacerbated our backlog, for example the financing of the \$30M pedestrian bridge over Northside Drive which diverted money from countless other infrastructure projects. With a dedicated office in place, we can better track our spending and establish benchmarks for infrastructure projects to keep them on track.

17. How important is sustainability to Atlanta's continued growth and vitality? What sustainability initiatives have been most successful in Atlanta to-date and how build you upon them?

Sustainability and resiliency are crucial if we want Atlanta to continue to grow and thrive long-term. It is clear that the effects of climate change are already upon us, so it is virtual that we proactively build and retrofit an Atlanta today that can withstand the trials of tomorrow. Although Atlanta established a Climate Action Plan in 2016, there are very few successful initiatives that have been brought to fruition to date. We have small programs which have pushed for the conversion of the municipal fleet to electric vehicles, and incentivized urban agriculture, but these initiatives are small potatoes when it comes to true sustainability. Some programs have proven to be more effective than others, such as the Atlanta Better Buildings Challenge, but we must bake sustainability into all future ordinances. With the lofty goal of 100% clean energy for the City of Atlanta by 2035 and the mounting pressure that extreme weather is placing on our infrastructure, we can't afford to wait to take bold action. On City Council, I would first push for citywide vulnerability assessments, including watershed, energy, and heat assessments, so that we can target our resources in the areas with the greatest need and the greatest potential for impact. Next, I will work with Invest Atlanta to establish resilient infrastructure standards around new development, create incentives for green infrastructure, and leverage the PACE program to make green energy more accessible. Third, I will push to allocate more funding to our Parks Department and toward acquiring land for intentional greenspace throughout the city, maintaining our tree canopy without stunting development. This investment will help with stormwater retention and offset the heat island effect as temperatures continue to rise. I know Atlanta can lead the way in environmental sustainability and resilience in the Southeast region.