

# Athens City Council Questionnaire on Housing

This questionnaire was created by United Athens County Tenants (UACT) to better understand the Athens City Council Candidates' position on tenants/housing related issues. Information collected in this questionnaire may be used in news articles, UACT's website, and/or social media.

Please see <https://www.athenstenants.com/> or @UntiedAthensCountyTenants to learn more about our group.

What is your name? \*

Damon Krane

Please select one of the following. I am a... \*

Renter

Owner only of a home, which you occupy.

Landlord

Other: .....

What housing issues do you see as the most pressing to tenants in Athens City? \*

Every year the Robert Wood Johnson Foundations ranks Athens County as having the absolute worst housing problems in the entire state of Ohio -- and by a longshot -- due to the unusually high costs and unusually low quality of our local housing stock, and coupled with the fact that the Foundation also ranks Athens County as having the highest income inequality in all of Ohio and some of the worst poverty.

In the City of Athens, the situation is especially bad for renters, due to the combination of a weak housing code and its even weaker enforcement. And student renters --due to their inexperience and transience-- are particularly vulnerable to being exploited by predatory landlords. The Carriage Hill/ Campus Heights Apartment Fire of 2017 (which is still making headlines nearly 5 years later as the subject of a class action lawsuit) is a good example of how the city's negligent approach to code enforcement endangers the lives of tenants -- and it's almost certain that lives will be lost if we don't change course.

I believe city officials need to stop denying the severity of our local housing problems. We need to substantially strengthen both our city housing code and its enforcement. That means passing new legislation and reallocating city funds to hire more rental housing inspectors. The city currently employs only 3 rental housing inspectors and only plans to hire 1 more. Yet these 3-4 inspectors are responsible for conducting up to 10,000 inspections annually at nearly 6,000 properties. That level of staffing is just grossly inadequate.

How do you plan to increase renters' rights and tenant wellbeing in the city of Athens? \*

I'll do more than merely pay lip service to the problems tenants face -- I'll get to work fixing them. In fact, I've already been working to fix those problems for 4 years, and I've had some real success. But if I'm elected to Council, I will be able to do much more.

Specifically, if elected to Council I will introduce legislation that doubles the number of rental housing code inspectors and overhauls the inspection process. I will introduce legislation that stops the city from continuing to issue rental permits to scofflaw landlords who consistently fail to keep their properties in compliance with our housing code. I will introduce legislation that makes unauthorized entry by landlords into tenant's homes and the wrongful withholding of tenants' security deposits violations of our city housing code. I will introduce legislation that creates insulation and weatherization requirements in rental housing in order to lower tenant utility bills, improve tenant comfort and public health, and shrink our city's carbon footprint all at the same time. I will introduce legislation that ends the current city practice of forcing tenants to pay to endure unsafe housing conditions for 60 days after the city discovers code violations before landlords face any penalties, and replace it with an enforcement process that immediately fines landlords for violations upon their discovery and that requires landlords to pay to re-house tenants in alternative, safe, code-compliant housing while unsafe conditions at the original property are corrected.

What steps will you take to support Athenians' access to homes, especially for under resourced households? \*

The current city council's answer to local poverty and unaffordable housing has been to subsidize the construction of new quarter million dollar homes in order to reduce the housing costs of wealthy homebuyers and thereby entice richer people to move here. I'm of course talking about the University Estates Tax Incentive District championed by Council member Sarah Grace and the now-defeated, lame duck council member Chris Fahl. Grace and Fahl even had the audacity to misrepresent this textbook gentrification scheme as an "affordable housing initiative" until they faced backlash from other council members and the general public, and suddenly changed their cover story to providing "sustainable" and "disabled accessible" housing initiative. Given the carbon costs of new construction and the fact that the homes in question are two-story townhouses, the new cover stories are no more convincing than the original cover story of providing "affordable housing" that's out of most residents' price range.

I have a different approach to addressing local poverty, economic inequality, and unaffordable housing. Instead of putting public resources into gentrification schemes that encourage wealthier people to move here and price more current residents out of city limits, I believe we should be working to make housing more affordable for the many local residents currently paying more than 30% of their gross annual household incomes on housing costs.

If elected, I will work to repeal the University Estates Tax Incentive District, put a stop any future initiatives like it, and work to support actual affordable housing initiatives, like providing assistance to first-time single family home buyers; slowing, stopping, and reversing the conversion of single family city homes into rental properties; and supporting progressive taxation instead of the city's current regressive approaches to generating revenue, which include selectively enforcing parking regulations against low-income renters and imposing the maximum city service fees on rental households by default.

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Including community recommendations when developing policies and programs is a best practice for effective and lasting solutions. How will you include those impacted by housing needs in developing and implementing housing solutions? \*

I've been a renter in Athens for 15 years, and I'm a founding members of United Athens County Tenants. I know the problems local tenants face because I face them myself, and because I regularly work to assist tenants through UACT and on my own.

In addition, I'm also a community organizer with 25 years of experience creating democratic, member-run organizations that empower marginalized, exploited and historically oppressed people to defeat powerful institutions and win better lives.

My housing policy initiatives are always informed by the tenants and aspiring first time homebuyers I'm in constant contact with. And since 2017 I've been working to lay the groundwork for a local tenant union, through which tenants will achieve collective power and exercise leverage over local policy directly.

Helping people win power over the decisions that affect their lives and creating a more equitable and democratic world literally has been my life's work since I was 17 years old. I think we need at least one person like that on Council.

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Would you support a "Pay to Stay" ordinance, where a landlord may not proceed with the eviction for nonpayment of rent if that tenant presents the full rent due plus late fees by the time of the eviction hearing. \*

Yes

No

Other: 

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Please explain why or why not. \*

There's no mystery here. I unequivocally support "Pay to Stay" because this will improve the lives of struggling local families. And I don't just commit to supporting a "Pay to Stay" ordinance; I commit to introducing it myself, if elected.

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Would you support a "Just Cause Eviction" ordinance? "Just cause" (or "good cause") eviction policies promote residential stability by limiting the grounds upon which a landlord may evict a tenant; typically, allowable grounds for eviction include nonpayment of rent, intentional damage to the unit, or other material noncompliance with the terms of the lease. \*

Yes

No

Other: .....

Please explain why or why not. \*

As with "Pay to Stay," I unequivocally support a "Just Cause Eviction" ordinance because it will improve the lives of struggling local families. And again, I don't just commit to supporting an ordinance; I commit to introducing it myself, if elected.

Would you support relocation assistance for tenants? This is a policy where landlords must pay relocation expenses for tenants forced to leave units condemned by the Department of Code Enforcement. \*

Yes

No

Other: .....

Please explain why or why not. \*

Absolutely. And again, if elected I will do everything in my power to see that Council passes this policy. However, I don't think the policy goes far enough.

A property shouldn't have to be so far out of code compliance that it's actually condemned before a landlord is required to relocate tenants to safe, code-compliant alternative housing. I believe we should require landlords to pay the costs of relocating tenants to safe, code-compliant alternative housing for whatever time it takes to correct any violations of our city housing code that city inspectors identify.

Tenants should no longer be expected to pay rent while enduring the dangers of code violations the city itself has identified, with the city giving landlords 60 days to correct violations before facing any penalties, as the city current does. That's just absurd. And no doubt the city's current inadequate code enforcement policy contributed to the Carriage Hill / Campus Heights Apartments Fire of 2017, which cost 41 tenants their homes, and which very well could have cost them their lives.

If you've got an expired parking meter, the city doesn't give you two months to come up with a quarter before issuing you a fine. If APD pulls you over for speeding, the city doesn't give you two months to slow down before issuing you a ticket. Our city needs to hold landlords accountable to the same standard when tenant safety is at stake. We can't keep endangering tenants' lives in order to give landlords unparalleled preferential treatment. Landlords must supply tenants with safe, code-compliant housing or immediately be penalized for failing to do so. And for whatever time a landlord fails to provide safe, code-compliant housing at the originally leased property, I believe the city should require that landlord to pay to re-house tenants in alternative housing that is safe and code-compliant.

Do you have experience working to change city policy prior to holding office? If so, what? And were your efforts successful or not? \*

Yes. In the past two years alone, through my 2019 mayoral campaign and my subsequent work with United Athens County Tenants, I've successfully pressured Athens City Council to pass its most pro-tenant legislation in decades. My 2019 mayoral campaign's focus on housing justice shamed Council into increasing penalties for repeat offender landlords that August, and I helped lead the nearly 2-year effort to get Council to ban source of income discrimination that finally succeeded this June.

Furthermore, after I spent two years publicly criticizing the unrepresentative makeup of a City Council composed entirely of affluent white homeowners and landlords with an average age of 54 -- on which no tenant or openly queer person had served in 13 years, and on which no Black person perhaps ever had served -- the Athens County Democratic Central Committee broke with decades of past practice and replaced two Council members who resigned earlier this year --both of them middle aged white homeowners, and one a landlord-- with two tenants in their thirties, one of them an openly gay Black man.

And for every positive change I've achieved on the housing justice front, I've had to drag along our city's establishment kicking and screaming. But like Frederick Douglass said, "Without struggle there is no progress. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did, and it never will."

Yet while I've had significant success getting Council to start improving housing policy, I am sad to report that so far I've had less success pushing Athens city officials to improve policy concerning racial equity and increased police accountability and oversight, which also has been a major focus of mine since last summer.

In addition to co-founding United Athens County Tenants, I am also a co-founder of Athens County Copwatch. Copwatch has studied 5 years worth of Athens Police Department data obtained through public records requests and found that APD used force against Black people at 2.6 times the rate it used force against white people. We got a racist cop removed from the Nelsonville police force, and we exposed the Hocking County Sheriff's promotion of overtly racist officers and his ties to far right insurrectionists calling for "civil war against Satan's Democrats" and "the left." At the same time, we did our best to hold Athens city officials' feet to the fire over them breaking all the promises of their own June 2020 racial equity resolution and passing new 3-year police union contracts without the promised racial equity review or any new attention paid to racial justice issues.

On my own, outside of Copwatch, most recently I have criticized Council for breaking its own rules to eliminate all opportunity for public comment before rushing through its decision to spend \$91K on a racial equity training course that, in the absence of the city's promised racial equity review, cannot be directed at solving any specific problems of racial inequity and therefore cannot be measured in terms of its effectiveness -- a purchase made even worse by the fact that it was brokered by the mayor, who is also a member of the very organization that sold us the course. Indeed, by the mayor's own admission he was appointed to the National League of Cities' Race, Equity and Leadership Council while in the middle of selling our city the organization's course. Given the mayor's lackluster record on racial equity and police reform, one has to wonder whether his appointment was simply the reward for his salesmanship. And that makes the course's purchase a blatant case of conflict of interest, as well as an expensive performative gesture unlikely to bring about the substantive change we need. Council should not be rubber stamping such things, but instead making good on the promises of its June 2020 racial equity resolution to identify

and correct instances of local racial inequity.

But all that said, it took nearly two years to get city officials to ban source of income discrimination, even after Council member Sarah Grace broke her 2019 campaign promise to support a SOID ban, but then never introduced a SOID ban after being elected and instead came out against a ban as late as this March. Therefore, it will likely take just as long to get the city to make good on the currently broken promises of its June 2020 racial equity resolution and finally start meaningfully addressing our problems of racial inequity in local policing and city governance.

If I'm elected to Council I will have more power to advance housing and racial justice in Athens. But what I think my record off Council makes clear is that I'm not someone who makes false promises to get elected or just to make myself look good. Voters can trust me to actually do what I say when it comes to advancing housing, economic and racial justice.

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What is your name? \*

Iris Virjee

Please select one of the following. I am a... \*

Renter

Owner only of a home, which you occupy.

Landlord

Other: .....

What housing issues do you see as the most pressing to tenants in Athens City? \*

I believe that the most pressing issue is the precedent of landowners exploiting the wealth disparity in Athens to justify extremely high rental prices for houses in extremely poor condition. The population of those who can afford high rent encourage investors, as well as city officials, to take part in gradually pushing affordable housing out of the city, and likewise using tax dollars and policy to benefit affluent neighborhoods while neglecting others. Meanwhile, many landowners do not even live in the area, so much of that rental income is leaving the local economy. Landowners also tend to take advantage of young students and busy working families who lack the information, resources, and time to insist that their rights as tenants are being respected. These actions, which have unfortunately become the standard, result in a web of processes that maintain and heighten wealth-based inequality in terms of mobility, access to amenities, safety, and ultimately quality of life.

How do you plan to increase renters' rights and tenant wellbeing in the city of Athens? \*

Improving conditions for renters would be a multi-faceted project. (Note: Housing is, in many ways, at the root of a broad range of other socio-economic variables, like access to affordable groceries, the quality of your school district, what type of transportation you use and how that can limit your mobility, and general well-being, as just a few examples. Of course, lower-income tenants tend to be the most disadvantaged by these factors. These are things to keep in mind when approaching this and other housing-related questions.) Certainly, introducing ordinances and amending policies to address the structural features mentioned above would be an important step. For example, the recent ban of Source of Income discrimination was a much-needed victory for low-income renters who had previously been blatantly rejected from the majority of city space. This was, I believe, the first step of many in reforming unjust and inadequate policies that affect our citizens, many of whom are facing greater difficulties following the economic upset of the past year. I believe the city has a duty, and also an opportunity, to learn from the hardships that have been exposed (but have long existed for many), and to make adjustments to best serve the community. However, the introduction and effectiveness of these types of changes are dependent upon transparency and education. In fact, many HUD-dependent families are still unaware of the recent change, which of course benefits those landowners that were reluctant to adapt. Making tenants' rights information and new ordinance information not only "available" but offered to the best of our ability and in multiple, easy to understand formats, is a key part of making meaningful improvements.

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What steps will you take to support Athenians' access to homes, especially for under resourced households? \*

My previous response covers most of the same topics, but I would add that short-term rentals, such as Air Bnb, are something that the city should approach thoughtfully and carefully going forward. While they can certainly be beneficial for inviting visitors to patronize local business and build the local economy, I am concerned about investors who will take advantage of evictions, foreclosures, etc., buying out expensive houses and flipping them, raising nearby property value and thus rent, and again, most likely living elsewhere and taking that money out of the local economy. Not only would this continue to drive up the cost of rent, but it would contribute to the scarcity of affordable housing, leaving under-resourced households with fewer and fewer options.

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Including community recommendations when developing policies and programs is a best practice for effective and lasting solutions. How will you include those impacted by housing needs in developing and implementing housing solutions? \*

My response to this question closely overlaps with my discussion about transparency. I believe that the lack of communication in the past has been a result of disconnect-- as in, officials working in the professional realm of city government may have an insufficient understanding of the barriers facing some communities within the city, whether that be mobility, technology, jargon, etc. The alternative, or perhaps a combination of both, being a deliberate shrouding of information from those communities, who might have opinions that would inconvenience the progress toward the city's preferred solution, were they properly informed. This might sound radical, but I struggle to believe that transparency, and receiving input from all parts of the community is such a difficult task, and it is known that past ordinances have been rushed through the voting process before even reaching the public. Whether for "necessity" or otherwise, this shows blatant disregard for the communities' opinions on choices that will affect them. Again, providing easy to read information in multiple formats and platforms, and welcoming citizens to provide their input through a different options of communication, is a simple solution.

Would you support a "Pay to Stay" ordinance, where a landlord may not proceed with the eviction for nonpayment of rent if that tenant presents the full rent due plus late fees by the time of the eviction hearing. \*

Yes

No

Other: .....

Please explain why or why not. \*

Yes, assuming that all other possible alternatives, including future amendments that might improve cooperation and fairness, have been exhausted. I would like to look further in to cases where this has been established, and the pros and cons associated.

Would you support a "Just Cause Eviction" ordinance? "Just cause" (or "good cause") eviction policies promote residential stability by limiting the grounds upon which a landlord may evict a tenant; typically, allowable grounds for eviction include nonpayment of rent, intentional damage to the unit, or other material noncompliance with the terms of the lease. \*

Yes

No

Other: .....

Please explain why or why not. \*

I would support an ordinance of this type, on the condition that it is exceptionally clear on which circumstances are just or not, and that it provides an accessible avenue by which any gray areas can be resolved. Other clarifying issues would have to be addressed as well, such as: How long after an initial missed payment is grounds for eviction, and should there be mandated exceptions in place in case of extenuating circumstances? Can damages be negotiated between the tenant and landlord, and should the landlord have to provide proof that the repairs were done at a reasonable price? Should the landlord have to prove that all promised/required amenities were in working condition at the time of the eviction? These, and more, are all matters that must be addressed in order to minimize the type of unfair enforcement that is already rampant with current policy, and which must be made comprehensible, accessible, and actionable to tenants in order to be a meaningful improvement.

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Would you support relocation assistance for tenants? This is a policy where landlords must pay relocation expenses for tenants forced to leave units condemned by the Department of Code Enforcement. \*

Yes

No

Other: .....

Please explain why or why not. \*

I would absolutely support this policy, since the tenants presumably signed a lease on the basis of exchanging money for liveable shelter, at the minimum standard of the local code, if not better. In this case especially, the burden of relocation should not be placed on them.

Do you have experience working to change city policy prior to holding office? If so, what? And were your efforts successful or not? \*

I have not participated extensively in formal policy changes. Most of my experiences so far have been on campus, or in awareness projects, as I am still pretty young compared to other and previous candidates, so I admit my experience is limited.

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