

# 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? \*

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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