



# WINONA AREA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE 2022 CANDIDATE QUESTIONS

## City Council

Michelle Alexander – At Large Candidate

- 1. Please provide a brief biography detailing your background and including your occupation, job title, employer, and education.**

Hello Chamber members. I am Michelle Alexander, your current city council member at large. I have lived in Winona for 40 years. My mother's family settled here in the 1800s and my father is a 1980's twin cities transplant.

I am a WSHS and WSU graduate with a degree in History. I own a real estate company, Alexander & Associates, and operate as Chief Financial Manager of my family's property management company, Winona Property Management. I have worked with my father for the last 22 years building the rental property business.

- 2. Among the Chamber's top priorities are economic development, workforce development, and community promotion. Explain how you see those priorities as important to our community and explain how you would work alongside the Chamber and business community on such initiatives?**

As a business owner and a city council member these issues are of vital importance to me. I have worked hard to ensure ordinances and city programming are friendly to the business community, while enhancing the quality of Jobs and lifestyle of Winona. I have fought for TIF programming when appropriate, housing developments to provide quality housing for our workforce and have supported improvement of our park system to help create a community that attracts talent that will choose to live and work in Winona. I argued for Bay State, Cytec, and TRW often under great community pressure. I have supported developments that provided an increase to tax base, Housing, and job creation and I will continue to do so.

- 3. Winona has a long history of being a transportation, business and manufacturing hub in the region. Winona has experienced a new surge in tourism and arts industry in the last decade. What strategies do you embrace for the future of Winona? (You may pick more than one)**
  - a. Expand Port, rail, trucking and other transportation facilities and related infrastructure.**

As a member of the Port Authority and a Co-Chair of the Economic Development committee of the Coalition of Greater Minnesota I have firsthand experience with the importance of transportation as it relates to costs of living, job stability and a functioning economy. Although I have only been on the Port for a year and a half, I am proud of the improvements we have made to Winona's Port. It is vital not only to our economy but to the state and region. I will continue to advocate for improvements to the Port and using the Port's many assets to benefit the community's growth and development.

**b. Enhance tourism development with focus on downtown, limiting truck traffic and encouraging new small business in downtown.**

When I first ran for office 13 years ago my platform focused on the revitalization of the downtown, promotion of arts and culture as a vital part of Winona's economy and a 2<sup>nd</sup> train stop in Winona. These three issues will always play an important role in my continue work with the city. But I believe that continuing to partner with organizations and non-profits like the Chamber, Visit Winona, SEMAC, WSU and St. Mary's as well as our own Fine Arts Commission is the best way to support Arts and Tourism. We have amazing people in Winona with the skill and reach to promote the community in a way the city alone could never accomplish. I do believe that we can continue to encourage the development of festivals like MWMF, GRSF, Beethoven Festival and Boats & Blue Grass by creating an easy process to use city spaces and resources.

**c. Pursue additional commercial/industrial land for future expansion of Winona's existing and emerging manufacturing businesses.**

As Winona is Land Locked and has limited developable land, we need to be creative. Annexation, rezoning, and looking at possible new uses for underutilized or undeveloped lots will always play an important role for the Planning Commission, Comprehensive Plan development and the Council as we try to work within our limited footprint. This is something the city has excelled at in the last 12 years. We have seen housing developments and hotels, business growth and future planning that has continued to see the managed growth and planning that comes from a highly effective community development department as Winona is very lucky to have.

**4. What do you believe are barriers for business growth and what would you do to influence how the City addresses these barriers?**

The most important option available to the City Council is limiting ordinances that restrict growth and development of businesses. We also need to be flexible in allowable land uses to encourage our established businesses to continue to grow here in Winona instead of searching further afield. We also need to watch the tax rate and keep it in pace with tax base growth. Winona has an affordable housing market but increases in tax rate can affect pay, rent, and cost of living. Taxes need to give value for cost. It is a balancing act that must be carefully managed.

**5. What is the role of City government to improve the start-up business environment in Winona?**

I believe this is managed well through the Port Authority and City's Community development department as well as in partnership with the Chamber. The Council can further help by limiting government costs and restrictions. The Port Authority and Community Development Department excel in these areas.

- 6. Winona's success has led to questions and discussion on how to manage increased growth. How would you ensure the city appropriately balances the need for additional government (public safety, serves, etc.) without unfairly burdening citizens and businesses (zoning regulations, increasing taxes, etc.) as we address the symptoms of growth?**

The city needs to make it easier for developers and businesses to grow by offering incentives like TIF. We can aide in applying for grants, locating ideal land for development and look at Winona's available resources for re-zoning or new use. If the Council properly budgets, we can manage and encourage growth which helps offset and balance the increases in tax rate. In the last 12 years we have seen development keep even pace with the tax rate so that increases in taxes are resulting in a negative increase in property taxes or nominal. It will be the responsibility of the council moving forward to properly educate themselves on the tax rate and tax base in relation to growth and community needs. The city has worked hard to properly plan for a work to allowing acceptable development depending on the location. We continue to study city needs and work for allowable growth which provides quality jobs and excellent places to live.

- 7. What is your vision for the future of Winona?**

Winona is an amazing place to live. We have beautiful natural resources that are enjoyed year-round. We have extraordinary individuals and non-profits that have created much love festivals that attract people from all over to our community. We host three higher education entities that provide additional options, resources, entertainment, and support to the community. I feel truly blessed to represent this town. I think my role in Winona's future is support. Maybe as a volunteer or a cheerleader. We are on a wonderful path, and more is not always more. My focus moving into the future will be meeting the communities housing needs, continuing to work to improve the park system and help manage development and growth to make sure the businesses and individuals do not feel an unnecessary burden on their property taxes.

- 8. Each of Winona's three higher education institutions has distinct and unique issues as we move into the future. How do you see the City working with the colleges and universities issues?**

The three higher education facilities add significant value to the community. They provide cultural and sports entertainment, options for continuing education and draw people to the community as tourists and short term and long-term residents. The students provide invaluable part time labor and internships that help keep the economy going and make it possible for many of the small businesses to function. I think they are an invaluable asset and believe the city foster a very good relationship with all of three of the institutions. We currently work well with collaborative programing and allowing growth and redevelopment as they reassess their needs and the desires of the population of incoming students. Communication is key and I think we currently have an excellent line of communication with these three community assets.

- 9. As a City leader, what approach would you take to balance community growth and the rights of private property owners?**

As a REALTOR it should be no surprise that I value private property rights as supreme. I will continue to fight to protect and defend an individual's right to self-determination. The choices financial and otherwise that each person make should have as little government interference as possible. I believe

the city's job is to provide Police, Fire, Clean water, and sewer, and manage the city's infrastructure and to only regulate as necessary for the larger community's safety or interest. For example, I would not support moving a housing community next to heavy industry that deals with noise, traffic, dust, and noxious smells.

**10. Where do you stand on possible future pandemic mitigations? How would you balance having a vibrant local economy while maintaining a safe community?**

Public safety in relation to pandemics should be managed at a higher level of government (state or federal). Having an isolated city try to enforce a mandate that disappears at an arbitrary border seems pointless.

I also believe that everyone, family or business and organization must decide for themselves which mandates they want to impose within their own authority. Asking businesses to enforce city mandates places an undue hardship on that entity. However, I do believe city leaders should lead by example and encourage behaviors that may benefit the community. We can also protect the right of each business or organization to enact any mandate within their facility that they feel is necessary. i.e., masking.

**11. Where do you stand on the Police & Fire Safety Center (eg. East End Rec) issue from a standpoint of business growth and development.**

We need to address the needs of both the Police and Fire department. The location only matters in relation to the Fire department as they must meet ISO and response time requirements. This is vital to keep insurance rates low and create the safest environment possible. We are creatively looking for funding options so that we are not solely burdening the tax rate. We are planning a Public Safety Building that has many shared spaces that will have shared costs and resources meaning that long term and immediate costs will be less as well. Anyone that has visited the Police Department understands the very real needs of that city department. I am a supporter of both Fire and Police, and Minnesota is facing a very real crisis or available police officers. Winona is not protected from that shortage. We must create an environment that is safe and meets the most basic needs of both departments.

**12. Many communities across the state have seen many public safety officers leave or retire early from their positions. These same communities are having difficulty re-filling these positions due to negative public perceptions and lack of funding. What steps do you believe need to be taken to ensure that our community's law enforcement is adequately funded and supported so that our community remains safe and healthy.**

I believe our first step is to provide a healthy work environment that meets the most basic needs of the workforce using it. We need to keep pace with the pay rate of Police departments across the state and we need to back our police officers publicly, providing the support they need in a climate that is very difficult for them to work within. We need to work with the state to incentivize those considering entering the police force. We need to work in our community to create a healthier narrative and a better relationship with our local police force.