

Citizens for Quality Parks and Trails

2017 City Council Candidate Questionnaire

1. We have a quality system of trails for running, biking and walking. How do you plan to improve and expand our system in the future as Lincoln grows?

BAIRD: As a mom who appreciates the safety trails offer my children when they ride their bikes, as a wife who likes to go for walks with her husband along the Rock Island trail on summer nights, and as a ½ marathoner who has worn out multiple pairs of running shoes on the Jamaica North, Homestead, Helen Boosalis, and MoPac trails, I know firsthand the value that our trails network offers Lincoln's families.

Improving and expanding the trails system involves a steady, sustained effort by the city over the long-term. We must continue to partner with other entities, such as the Natural Resource Districts (NRDs), UNL, and the Great Plains Trails Network (GPTN) who can bolster this effort. The growth of the city itself will further this effort through impact fee revenues that are designated for parks and trails, as will a commitment to Complete Streets, sidewalk connectivity, and appropriately placed bike routes. Grant funds from the Land and Water Conservation Fund (the city currently has a pending application for improvements to the MoPac trail) and the Community Health Endowment should be explored as a potential source for trail enhancements in underserved areas of the city.

CHRISTENSEN: Did not reply.

McLAUGHLIN: As an urban planner, I would seek to ensure we include trails in all future development plans. I would look for ways to further improve access and connectivity throughout the city.

NESBITT: One option we might look at is user fees. Other cities have successfully gone to user fees for expanding and maintaining their trail systems, especially as budget pressure increases.

SHOBE: I agree Lincoln has a quality system of trails. I would identify and join forces with community organizations that are currently involved with improving the trails. I need to develop a better understanding of what has been done and what current plans exist before developing ideas to improve the current trails system. I would love to see and the segments of the existing trails systems connected and integrated as into the current city transportation system.

SQUIRES: Lincoln has quality trails & I believe we can improve lighting along the trails, including solar lights on trails and in parks. Improving lighting using solar on trails & in parks saves the city money & reduces crime by keeping all areas well lit. We can improve trails by using reflective paint on sidewalks & trails to improve visibility, especially at night & in inclement conditions.

2. As a member of the city council, would you seek to change the level of public investment for bike/pedestrian infrastructure? How should the City pay for improvements for this non-motorized transportation infrastructure?

BAIRD: Lincoln is growing, and I am committed to making sure Lincoln grows in a smart way. Spending millions of dollars on new assets like the arena and Antelope Valley doesn't provide the same return on investment if we allow other city assets to deteriorate beyond repair. The trails, sidewalks, and streets in front of our homes and businesses need our continued investment if we want to maintain the high quality of life that we enjoy in our city today.

As both a Planning Commissioner and a City Councilwoman, I've advocated for and supported increased investment in our sidewalks. This work is of particular value to Lincoln taxpayers, as it provides improved pedestrian/bike/ADA accessible infrastructure, reduces the City's liability, and protects property values. I'm similarly pleased to have supported our city's brand new bike share program and facilities. The bike share program is increasing our investment in bike infrastructure through a Congestion Management Air Quality (CMAQ) grant and private sponsorships for individual stations and equipment.

Looking to the future, one realistic way we could change the level of public investment for bike/pedestrian infrastructure is to adjust the city's Keno revenue appropriation for the Parks Department. Historically, these appropriations have been conservative, but the recent, stable growth in Keno revenue suggests we could safely allocate additional funds to support pedestrian/bike infrastructure.

CHRISTENSEN: Did not reply.

McLAUGHLIN: As your city councilman, I would seek input and suggestions from stakeholders. As an urban planner, and former employee of the MAPA, I understand how multi-modal transportation can work together to improve connectivity in Lincoln.

NESBITT: See #1. A wheel tax or user fee could be an option to fund improvements or expansions to our wonderful trail system, which allows users to pay for what they are using.

SHOBE: Yes, I will work to increase it through public/private partnerships similar to the one used to fund the N street cycle track.

SQUIRES: I'd like to see the make-up of current revenue & income for non-motorized infrastructures & parks & trails. I'd like to know how much revenue comes from the foundation & how much comes from the general fund? Public investments could come in the form of "adopting a trail" & developers should be assessed a fee to help fund parks & trails during neighborhood rejuvenation projects.

3. Currently we have a \$775,000 annual funding gap that's needed to ensure timely repairs and replacements for our parks, trails and recreation facilities. What are your ideas for addressing this annual gap to provide long-term maintenance funding that is needed to sustain our parks, trails and recreation facilities?

BAIRD: Our city's infrastructure includes a park system put in place by the generations of Lincolniters who came before us. We have an obligation to keep playground equipment safe for children. We need to do the required maintenance that keeps our recreational facilities standing. We need to mow our parks. We cannot afford to fall further behind. This is why, over the past four years, I worked to identify efficiencies in the city budget and successfully redirected them to the Parks Department's repair and replacement line item. This ultimately reduced the annual maintenance funding gap by approximately \$500,000.

To address the remaining gap, the city, as previously mentioned, potentially could utilize additional Keno revenue appropriations. I'd also like to see closer work between the new city Purchasing Director and the Parks Department - which might maximize funds and shrink the gap by competitively sourcing replacement capital items at lower prices than Parks currently pays. For example, LPS and the Parks Department potentially could jointly source new playground equipment to achieve economies of scale in purchase price. I'm also looking forward to examining the results of the new Greenways and volunteer coordinator's efforts to utilize the assistance of civic-minded citizens in maintaining our parks.

CHRISTENSEN: Did not reply.

McLAUGHLIN: Our city will always have to face tough budgeting decisions. We must maintain our parks and trails, but I would like to look at some out of the box solutions, including public/private partnerships to improve funding and maintenance. These partnerships have worked well in other bike/ped friendly cities.

NESBITT: Additionally, for those who might not find these user fees within their stringent budgets, another idea would be to create a Citizen Conservation Corps, where users could get credit toward their fees for hours of volunteer services, doing tasks like policing and maintaining our trails and parks. Make volunteer maintenance an option. I have a vested interest in these facilities, in part because I am a golfer.

SHOBE: Without more detailed information about current city budget needs I cannot answer the question honestly. I will advocate and work to increase the monies spent on maintenance, repairs and replacement of current city parks and green spaces.

SQUIRES: Parks & Rec have a 19.9 million/year budget. It is hard to determine areas where we are able to improve. I'd also like to have further discussions on where the gap is originating: Are projects a necessity or a want? How can we reduce or cover gap? Again, I'd like to see developers assessed a fee when building new developments & redevelopment projects to help fund the parks & trails that are appropriate to the neighborhood.

4. How would you continue to support neighborhood services that provide positive recreation opportunities for our residents like neighborhood pools, recreation centers and neighborhood parks?

BAIRD: I have fought back when others have presented budget proposals that jeopardize our neighborhood parks, trails, pools, and recreation centers. While public safety remains our city's top priority and strengthening infrastructure is another fundamental responsibility, these neighborhood services are the third leg of the stool that supports the smart growth of our city. They are not only important for recreation, health, and the quality of life of our families, they are also economic development tools that make Lincoln an attractive city for employers and the talented workforce we want to recruit and retain.

CHRISTENSEN: Did not reply.

McLAUGHLIN: Our vibrant and unique neighborhoods are the cornerstone to our city, and city parks are an important piece of our neighborhoods. I will work with every neighborhood to ensure we are addressing their recreational needs. Neighborhood groups have a better understanding of what they need, and how we can improve their experience.

NESBITT: Again, one idea would be to allow people who use it to pay for it through admission fees, etc., while allowing those who are unable to pay to amass credits toward their fees by doing volunteer work in the parks, rec centers, etc.

SHOBE: By mobilizing users of those services and other allies to lobby city council to support these ventures. I would build stronger relationships with groups that are currently invested in using those services.

SQUIRES: Community outreach is important to provide positive recreation opportunities for our residents. It's necessary to reach out to individual neighborhoods to find out what specific needs exist for parks & trails in their area. We need to change the model. Are we providing what citizens want/need in a park? For example, if there are many children in the neighborhood, our best investment would be play structures in parks, if there are older citizens in the neighborhood, our best investment might be in green spaces with sidewalks. Aligning our investments with the needs of the community help to lower costs & maintenance for parks & trails. And, of course, assessing developers' fees to help fund parks & trails in the area of development.

5. What are your suggestions or thoughts about funding new recreational opportunities (bike park, indoor aquatic center, adventure sports (zip lines, kayaking, canoeing, etc.) that are helpful to attract millennials as part of our community's economic development strategy to bolster our work force?

BAIRD: I like these ideas but am first and foremost concerned with ensuring that the city does a better job of taking care of the assets we currently have. Shifting any existing resources towards new projects will only make our repair and replacement funding gap larger. Our partnership with the Lincoln Parks Foundation and generous local philanthropists has been and will continue to be a great avenue for pursuing new and major capital projects for the parks system, along with endowments to sustain them.

CHRISTENSEN: Did not reply.

McLAUGHLIN: I think we can do a lot to promote new recreational opportunities but making sure city government does not get in the way of young entrepreneurs. We need to encourage and promote this type of development, and try to eliminate any red tape or barriers that make development difficult.

NESBITT: This is an area where we need to think differently than we have in the past. Many of these activities work well together, so rather than having a separate center for each of these, why not combine many or all of them into a single community center, possibly in the downtown area. The library there is also looking for a new home and could be considered in the mix. Aside from the obvious budget savings that would result from combining things, there would also be a social advantage. We all may be too much involved in alone-ness, brought to us courtesy of today's technology. A multi-activity community center would bring us together, get us out to meet and greet. It could be a boon for our community. More creative thinking along these lines could bring our great community a long way, both financially and socially.

SHOBE: I favor the idea of developing new recreational opportunities, but I would like to do additional need assessments for members of our community, in addition to millennials, that meet the needs of all the residents of our community.

SQUIRES: As someone who works with millennials, I believe new recreation opportunities should include green, natural spaces. We spend more & more time on computers so it is important for there to be more naturalistic activities & options to encourage residents to interact with nature & work with the land. For example, parks with lots of trees where tools are provided, like small shovels, rakes, hatchets or spades that get people to work with the land & be in nature.