

# Tampa City Council 2023 survey Creative Loafing Tampa Bay (non-incumbent)

Creative Loafing Tampa Bay is beginning to put its voting guide together and would love to get some feedback from you since you're on the ballot. This is a pretty basic form asking you about your background and how you'd vote on certain issues. It includes multiple choice questions and lots of room for you to explain answers in your own words. We'll definitely be reaching back out with follow ups after your initial response. We'd like to hear back from you before Jan. 23 if possible. These responses are all on the record.

Email \*

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Your race is non-partisan, but do you care to disclose your party affiliation?

- ☒ Democrat
- ☐ Republican
- ☐ Independent
- ☐ Other
- ☐ Prefer not disclose

### Could you give us your quick elevator pitch? \*

For just over 30 years I have been involved in issues affecting or impacting Seminole Heights or the city overall. In the days when I worked and 8 to 5 schedule I would a lot of times then go to City Council on some issue impacting the neighborhood which made for long days. While that is not my schedule these days, I remain just as frustrated that we and other neighborhoods are still trying to get sidewalks 30 years later. I am still amazed at how little has been done on traffic calming, though at least getting stop signs has become much easier. I have watched how as a city we have managed to construct some beautiful features/amenities that have been very costly and yet we were able as a community to fund those items. Yet while the city budget has grown 1 billion dollars in just ten years to 1.9 billion we can only "find" \$11 million for sidewalks/crosswalks/street resurfacing. But in a blink of an eye a \$10 million contract to demolish a building on East Hanna and turns into a \$110 million build contract for a new City Service Center without discussion, debate or even a traffic study. There is a debate about dumping 50 million gallons of treated wastewater into the river where we draw the drinking water supply for all of us in the city. This project from what I have read is going to cost city of Tampa utility customers and taxpayers \$600,000,000. Some have projected well over a billion dollars or more. This discussion should have forever died months ago but it hasn't. There is not slick marketing pitch that will convince me that our water treatment facilities can begin to test for all the pharmaceuticals, household cleaners and solvents, etc. to keep them out of our drinking water. Many of these don't even have established safety levels. Housing is increasingly a challenge for many in our community. The median household income in Tampa is \$55,634, the point where half earn less. With prices where they are what is available for people making below that median income? So, I want to have a discussion about minimum lot sizes when a 5000 SF lot is a 150K to 200K north of Kennedy in most cases. And for those people who can't afford to buy or who choose to rent, maybe we need to have a discussion about annual caps on increases, after all we have a save-our-homes amendment that caps property tax assessments at 3% or the cost of living which ever is less, and we have a statutory cap on commercial assessments at 10%. I know many landlords that are invested in the community who have not raised rent on existing tenants dramatically, but I also know people who have had their rent jacked-up 40%, 50% or more. Transit. We are so far behind, and I am not getting any younger. Frankly I don't want to grow old in a city where I can't get around in when I can no longer drive. I have been listening to this discussion ever since I moved here 40 years ago. Let's get started on whatever incremental steps that can be taken in light of the failed referendum. If we as a city can find a way to chase a wastewater 600+ million-dollar boondoggle then we can find a way to do something within city limits that moves us down the road instead that empty can that has been kicked for 40+ years. My concerns are that we need to re-prioritize funds to help move all of us forward together and not just parts. We may be many neighborhoods, but we are ONE city and that should be reflected in our policies and decisions.

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Please feel free to give us a more robust explanation of your background and why you want to be a city councilperson.

I moved to Tampa in 1983, so while I am a transplant from someplace else, for most of my adult life Tampa has been my home.

My background includes 2 master's degrees from USF in Social Work and in Public Administration. My professional life includes 22 years in social work and 18 years as a Realtor. For the past 7 years I have been the owner of a small real estate brokerage business.

And here I am seeking to serve on City Council. I have been asked by numerous friends, colleagues, and neighbors why? Why?

Where do I find the motivation? I guess I remain optimistic that I can help to make things better, maybe it is the same naïve optimism that caused a 11-year-old foster kid to give up a week's allowance to donate to a losing presidential campaign 50 years ago, or to inspire the other kids a group home on the 2nd Earth Day to clean-up the trash over a half mile of road in front of the Presbyterian Childrens Village. That optimism that I, one person, could help build a better tomorrow myself or community didn't just get me through a childhood in and out of foster care (FYI less than 4% of former foster kids ever earn a 4 year degree), it has carried through most everything I have ever pursued.

Over the last 30 years I have advocated for issues and concerns impacting my neighborhood or the city. I am a former president of the Old Seminole Neighborhood Association and a former president of the South Seminole Heights Civic Association. At times back when Seminole Heights was not seen as a trendy neighborhood, that has meant long nights at City Council meetings after working all day. What I find frustrating is that after 30 years our neighborhoods are still begging for such basic things like useable sidewalks. That we are still debating and studying how to implement a transit system 40 years after I moved to Tampa. And now we have new battles like fighting to keep treated wastewater out of our tap water. I believe we can do better. I believe that we need to re-prioritize some of our city's 1.9-billion-dollar budget, a budget that has grown a Billion dollars in just 10 years. 30 years and I see so little progress on issues impacting neighborhoods across district 6. If you are of a certain age, do you remember the Popeyes cartoon where Wimpy promised to pay on Tuesday for a hamburger today but never paid? That sounds like what many of our neighborhoods have heard for decades. For the younger people I compare it going out and buying a new car with the money you needed to spend on fixing a leaking roof. We need to adjust our priorities. We may be a city of many neighborhoods, but we are ONE city and that should be better reflected in our policies and priorities. Our neighborhoods have needed to be more of a priority for quite some time. I guess therein is my answer to my friends, colleagues, neighbors' question of why. That is my answer to each of you as prospective votes as to "WHY" I am seeking this seat.

I focus on 8 key issues on my website at [www.RickFifer.com](http://www.RickFifer.com) and I would invite you to check it out.

What makes you more qualified than the incumbent or any of your other opponents in the race. We'd like to read specific examples and reasoning.

I believe I have a much more comprehensive perspective to the range of issues and challenges facing the neighborhoods of the district where I am running because I have spent so many years engaged at the neighborhood level among those who are not incumbants. As to Council member Miranda, that would pretty arrogant to claim greater experience; however, I would ask what has he done for the district over the years in the single member district? Longevity on City Council has not resulted in tangible improvements regarding pedestrian mobility and safety (ie side walks that are useable, additional sidewalks, or pedestrian crosswalks for Columbus, Howard, Armenis, MacDill, etc.) nor have I seen advocacy for revitalization of the West Tampa Business district. Miranda also voted against giving subpoena power to the CRB which I fully support.

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What do you call someone from Tampa?

- ☐ Tampeño
- ☐ Tampanian
- ☐ Other: .....

When it comes to the municipal flag of Tampa, do you stan or would you change it?

- ☐ STAN 100%
- ☐ Reluctantly Stan
- ☐ Needs a redesign

Tampa City Council recently rejected a Harbour Island hotel proposal after loud outcry from residents. As promised, the developer is suing the city for \$6.6 million. How would you have voted on the proposal, given all the context of neighborhood feedback and Tampa's trajectory as an emerging metro?

The proposed hotel was in the commercialized north end of Harbour Island which has high-rise condominiums and apartments. it did not seem inconsistent with the surroundings outside the gate portion of the Island and I would have been inclined to support it.

Hindsight is 20/20 at this point, but go back to the appointment of former police chief Mary O'Connor. Given the community feedback on Jane Castor's pick, would you have voted to confirm O'Connor for the position? Feel free to explain why or why not.

Given her past altercation with a sheriff's deputy, however long ago, I would have not been inclined to confirm her. The incident in Oldsmar, where she was in effect living in disregard of city policy just indicates a disposition and sends a message that the rules are only for the less privileged.

Staying on the topic of police. The Tampa PBA recently sent out a candidate survey that ruffled feathers, in part, because it asked about a candidate's support or affiliation with Black Live Matter, but skipped any questions about affiliations with white supremacist groups. From the dais, one city councilman asked the PBA to apologize. How would you have reacted to the survey, had you received it?

As a candidate I have found it interesting that that survey was never actually sent to me. It was not just the BLM question that was inappropriate or offensive. I read the document that was attached to the on-line version of Justin Garcia's article. I would have skipped the questions I found inappropriate, if it did not allow me to skip them it would not have been returned by me.

Would you have voted in support of expanded oversight capability—including subpoena power—for Tampa's police Citizens Review Board? Please feel free to expand on your yes or no answer.

Yes, which I have state in prior responses. If the CRB is trying to investigate an issue or incident and the party with information doesn't want to participate can just say "subpeona me". It leaves the CRB sort of ineffectual not having subpeona power. I am sure that is how some people would like it to remain.

A year ago, Tampa's Hanna Avenue 'City Center' project faced scrutiny after the public learned that its budget was increased from roughly \$6 million to \$108 million without a public RFP. Did that process trouble you? How would you have handled it if you were on council?

It is down the street from my home and yes it bothers me. I am having a real hard time reconciling that the City Charter puts budget decisions under the purview of City Council; it places approving contracts under City Council. Yet I see Council members asking how did that happen. A 1.9 billion dollar city budget is not a discretionary spending fund or at least it shouldn't be.

At a March 2022 press conference, Tampa Mayor Jane Castor told reporters that rent stabilization and rent control aren't viable solutions to the housing crisis because the measures would ["kill development."](#) What is your stance on rent control, and how would you have voted last August when council was talked out of putting the issue of rent control on last November's ballot?

I would not support the idea of "rent control" as presented. However, just as voters have approved caps on valuation assessments under "save our homes" and Florida Statute provides a 10% cap on annual commercial assessments, it does not seem unreasonable to have an annual cap regarding residential rent increases. When I have framed it that way, I found landlords and business people stop and say they think that is reasonable.

Last Halloween, as council was set to vote on charter amendments, Mayor Jane Castor said, "For more than fifty years, mayors and city councils have worked together for the betterment of our city under its current form of government. This system has served us well and resulted in a stronger, more prosperous city – and today, more than 90 percent of Tampa residents say they trust their city government."

That echoes a sentiment from former Tampa Mayor Bob Buckhorn, but we'd argue that the last 50 years has led to an inflection point where maybe the city should consider not abolishing the strong mayor form of government, but giving council more tools to check the mayor's power.

Especially now after Castor's recent vetoes, what's your take on charter amendments, specifically those that would give council more avenues to balance power in city hall?

The office of the Mayor has too much power under the Charter it needs rebalanced. If were rebalanced we might just have a more consistent focus from one Mayor to the next. I think the Charter proposals were modest tweaks and I think the histrionics of the former Mayor and current Mayor was ego driven.

If a vote to relocate the Christopher Columbus statue came up, how would you vote? Please answer yes or no, and feel free to explain why.

I would likely vote no. It would depend on where and what context it would be relocated to. I do not see this on the same level as the discussion regarding confederate monuments which were placed with an intentional message. Every historical figure is a mixture of good and bad in their impact, attributes, accomplishments.

Last September, council members all expressed either doubt or complete disapproval of the administration's PURE wastewater plans as a whole. The Tampa Bay Times recently confirmed environmentalists' concerns and reported that it was actually Tampa lobbyists who helped craft the legislation that will require Tampa to find some other use for the wastewater by 2032. What's your take on the situation? Would you have pushed on with PURE as it was presented?

My response is NO regarding PURE. And I am opposed to the idea of injecting wastewater into the aquifer...another bad idea from a few years back. The Mayor should have a discussion with her chief lobbyist about getting the law amended. I don't believe the residents of Tampa need to settle for a wastewater cocktail.

Please feel free to freestyle and tell us about anything that you didn't get to address above.

I think I have presented my ideas on several areas in addition to the ones referenced in my responses on my website ([www.RickFifer.com](http://www.RickFifer.com))

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