



**CANDIDATE NAME: Kate Sykes, District 5 City Council**

**City Council**

- What actions should the City Council take to support local businesses amid the coronavirus crisis? How would you ensure the council pursues these actions?

The pandemic has shown us how important local resilience is, and the critical role local government must play in shaping our economy around the goals of community care and cooperation, not competition and self-interest. Our neighborhood and city-wide businesses are literally a lifeline for our communities, and will become more so if we have any hope of moving away from fossil fuels. Many of our businesses face daunting economic hurdles with federal support coming far too late to save some. But not all local businesses should be given a bailout.

I believe that we must center equity in our COVID recovery plan, which is why I support the following assistance to local businesses that **provide a living wage, a democratically controlled workplace, sick-time, and dignified working conditions**: grants and zero or low-interest loans, eviction moratoriums and prohibitions on rental late fees, up to and including halting court proceedings and issuing executive orders to stop bank foreclosures; utility shutoff moratoriums, and deferral of local taxes, and permit and license fees. The only way to ensure the fulfillment of these goals is to organize workers and business owners around them, and to include workers in the writing of economic policy.

- Outside of the immediate needs of the pandemic, what three things would you work on that would help local businesses in Portland? How would this work alleviate the challenges local businesses currently face?
  1. Work with local businesses to divest from traditional policing and police cadet programs and invest in mental health and addiction recovery programs instead. Implement community care efforts that focus on addressing the root causes of homelessness, not just the impacts on tourism and business. Enlist local businesses in advancing existing work programs for job insecure people, as well as creating new work training programs, until we have a true Municipal Works Progress administration with a municipal jobs guarantee, to make Portland a world-class destination for workers.
  2. The building trades currently face a shortage of skilled labor. By passing a local Green New Deal (Question C), Portland will require any project receiving taxpayer subsidies to participate in an apprenticeship program to train the next generation of skilled workers. Workplaces may apply for state grant support to assist in the creation of such programs. Formal apprenticeships allow workplaces to create



equitable pay scales while also giving workers more control over their financial security and greater transparency in and control of their career trajectory.

3. I support restrooms for all, regardless of the ability to pay. We must build more public restrooms in high-traffic business districts and put out more public trash receptacles to take pressure off local businesses which are currently not fulfilling the public's expectation and need.
  4. A high cost for local workplaces is health insurance. We must lobby together with workers and employers for a state-level universal healthcare plan that is not underwritten by employers and, ultimately, for Medicare for All.
- What are your thoughts on the minimum wage referendum that would raise the minimum wage in Portland to \$15/hour?

I am a co-author of this ordinance, and in hindsight, I think it doesn't go far enough to meet the true needs of Portland's low-wage workers. The fight for \$15 made sense in 2017, but three years later, we should be organizing for a minimum wage that reflects the true cost of living in Portland. According to MIT's Living Wage Calculator, the living wage in Portland/South Portland for a single parent with a child is \$27/hour. That means many low-wage workers in Portland are already being forced to choose between buying groceries and paying rent. In a pandemic they're faced with the possibility of catching a deadly disease on top of that. Questions A's proposed hazard pay of \$18/hour, which would go into effect immediately under the current emergency declaration, is not even enough to bring some workers up to a living wage.

Businesses rightly cite concerns that this could cause closures; however, we cannot prioritize a business's right to exist over the value of human life. Low-wage essential workers, such as EMTs, grocery clerks, shelter workers, taxi drivers, and food service workers are at far higher risk of contracting COVID-19 than higher-paid teleworkers. Many minimum wage workers would decrease their exposure by decreasing their hours if they were paid enough to do so. By not offering hazard pay, we are forcing increased exposure upon these individuals, because the alternative is losing their home, or going without food or other necessary expenses. Not paying people a living wage in normal times is unconscionable; in a pandemic it is inhumane.

- How do local, independent businesses contribute to the vitality and strength of Maine's communities? Do franchises and chains offer the same value to Maine's communities?

We all know by now that the growth of large corporations has driven and continues to compound social and wealth inequality through wage suppression, tax evasion, and by increasing worker reliance on public assistance; however local businesses must be dispersed and regulated in order to strengthen the middle class, create local supply networks, and contribute positively to democracy by inviting workers to engage in the political sphere by



contributing to the decisions we as a community make about how we organize our resources for the common good, including how we support local business in meeting the needs of the community. In other words, local is not the only thing that matters. While some local businesses offer excellent value to our community, others pay poorly, mistreat their workers, pose health hazards, create public nuisances, and lobby our government for self-serving policies under the guise of the so-called “free market.” The labor market under capitalism is inherently exploitative and for that reason, businesses – local or ‘from away’ - should provide more than just a place for workers to labor at a fraction of the compensation of what their labor is worth.

- The City Manager is pursuing spending cuts and layoffs due to the budget shortfall caused by the pandemic. Which departments or programs do you think are most acceptable to be the focus of spending cuts? What is one department or program for which you would be unwilling to approve spending cuts?

I do not support austerity budgets and believe there is great peril ahead when we accept the rhetoric that city budgets should be managed like businesses. I am in favor of participatory budgeting wherever possible and believe the people should decide what city services are to be cut, kept whole, or boosted through a representative town meeting form of government. In the absence of that, the one place I would not approve spending cuts is to education, and the one place I would cut is traditional law enforcement. In FY2019 the city spent just over a million dollars on police overtime alone. Let’s start there.

- Rising real estate prices have impacted both commercial and [residential rents](#).
  - a) As commercial rents have increased, local businesses are being pushed out of Portland, and chains are moving in. What policies would you pursue that could help alleviate this problem?

I support rent stabilization programs for businesses that can demonstrate they are cooperative or that provide significant community benefit beyond merely being a “job creator.” Such businesses should pay less rent than business that are strictly private profit, or deal in goods and services that are non-essential and do not provide a tangible community benefit. Local businesses are often better positioned to understand the community they serve, and the supply chains that also support this community.

- b) Availability of affordable middle-market housing is critical to support a robust small-business community - for both owners and employees. How do you plan to address the critical shortage of affordable market-rate housing for the "missing middle" in the City?

Restricting Short-Term Rentals (STRs) will bring more between 2-4% of our long-term housing back on the market in Portland as either rentals or condos. This will go a long way towards addressing the artificial shortage of middle-class housing caused when Airbnb and other such



units are serving tourism, rather than our local housing needs, which our current STR policy has failed to move the needle on.

In addition, tenant protects such as those proposed by Question D, will help to stabilize rents while also creating a mechanism (tenant board) for property owners to raise rents in a reasonable and democratic manner to address capital expenses. We have been in a less volatile housing market for the last few years, but as the real estate market recovers and as more people see Portland as a refuge from climate crises and public health disasters, it will be critical to make sure that the most vulnerable among us – renters and low income workers - are protected.

I also support the use of city-owned land (and tax subsidies as applicable) for the development of low-equity cooperatively owned housing. Our best defense against the brutality of capitalism is each other.