



*YOUR business is OUR business!*

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**GREATER LAS CRUCES CHAMBER OF COMMERCE**

**ELECTION 2023**

**QUESTIONNAIRE FOR LAS CRUCES MAYORAL & COUNCIL CANDIDATES**

To inform our membership & business community, we invite you to complete this questionnaire below. Your completed questionnaire, along with your resume, will be emailed to our list serve, along with posting on our website ([lascruces.org](http://lascruces.org)). **Please submit this completed questionnaire & photo to [dmoore@lascruces.org](mailto:dmoore@lascruces.org) no later than Thursday, October 19<sup>th</sup>.**

DISCLAIMER: The Greater Las Cruces Chamber of Commerce does not endorse candidates, but provides our members materials & resources to make informed decisions. Additionally, we provide general election information on the municipal elections & encourage voter participation.



CANDIDATE NAME (as it appears on ballot): Johana Bencomo

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Election/Candidate Website: johana4lc.com

Please circle or highlight the position of which you are a qualified candidate:

Mayor

Councilor District 1

Councilor District 2

**Councilor District 4**

**Referencing the first 7 questions, we encourage you to present your “Plan of Action” in these areas.**

**1. Please identify the leadership qualities & experiences you will bring to this position.**

First and foremost, I am a social worker and a community organizer. In my role as the City Councilor for District 4, I will continue to lead with the values and skills that shaped me through my previous work: being grounded in community, working with directly impacted people to get work done, and lifting up bold, evidence-based solutions. As the current City Councilor for District 4, I am proud to say I have worked closely with the community to address the challenges facing our district and the wider Las Cruces community. The devastating ripple effects of the global pandemic remain, and steady leadership and a clear understanding of our local context, gaps, needs, and funding opportunities will be critical as we continue to face these challenges. As the incumbent, I am confident in my ability to lead through these challenging times with bold, innovative, and community-rooted solutions. With historic state revenues projected once again, we have an opportunity to lobby for critical funds to help meet our needs. I have the knowledge, experience, and courage to fight for what Las Cruces needs.

**2. Ensuring all voices are heard & considered can be daunting, what is your plan to actively engage citizens & businesses in the decision-making process for city policies & projects, while maintaining civility and decorum between all interested parties?**

In the last four years I have made it a priority to build and cultivate relationships with residents, business leaders, non-profit leaders, our unions, advocates, and other stakeholders in our community. This is invaluable experience that is necessary to be an effective and trustworthy leader. I am committed to continuing to build relationships and have courageous conversations, especially with folks committed to finding solutions to the challenges ahead of us. One great example of this collaboration was passing the amendment to our housing discrimination ordinance to include source of income discrimination. Our Housing Policy Review Committee and Housing Staff worked closely with the Las Cruces Realtors Association to finalize the language and disseminate accurate information to those directly impacted.

Regarding civility and decorum, earlier this year I considered not running for re-election because the public discourse on many issues has become so extreme and negative. But I am committed to the work and know there is too much at stake. The standard I set for myself when working with others is for all to bring solutions to the table, not just grievances, and to listen to others' thoughtful proposals. This is the standard we should all hold ourselves to as we work on creating or improving policies and projects for the betterment of our community.

**3. Economic & business development, along with talent/workforce preparation, in Las Cruces is key to our continued growth & sustainability. Please give us your definition of “business friendly” & describe your economic development plan, including entrepreneurship.**

Being a business-friendly city means that city processes are set up to be easily accessible, understandable, equitable, and timely.

My three main strategies for economic development are implementing our two Metropolitan Redevelopment Areas (MRA); creating new and enhancing existing workforce development programs, and continuing to invest in our Industrial and Innovation Park.

The MRAs are powerful economic development tools that will focus on revitalizing historically neglected and blighted areas. Thanks to State Senator Hamblen, starting in 2024, the MRAs will have a reliable funding source. Much like the Downtown Tax Increment Development District (TIDD), the new law will allow us to collect GRT tax increment in the designated MRAs without raising taxes. With this funding, these two areas will have the funds necessary to bring new life, support new and existing businesses, enhance safety programs, and leverage capital improvement to areas that desperately need it. The MRAs also allow for a remedy to the anti-donation clause, so we are more easily able to work with private entities to bring improvement.

We have \$1,000,000 of unused American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds available after a project fell through. We are in the process of allocating these funds to five projects that will jumpstart workforce development programs in collaboration with key institutions and industries such as DACC, construction, hospitality, and other trades. Ensuring that workforce training is addressing skills called out as necessary by local employers will support programs relevant to job providers and job seekers, creating pipelines from program completion into local jobs.

Lastly, we have made great strides with our Industrial Park, but more can be done to ensure the park is ready to welcome more companies that are willing to invest in our communities, pay fair wages, and create more jobs.

**4. Addressing homelessness is a complex issue. What strategies do you propose to provide support and resources for individuals experiencing homelessness while also addressing the concerns of residents and business owners?**

The key to this very complex issue is implementing root cause solutions for long-term change, with short-term strategies that bring relief to those most impacted. I believe the biggest challenge facing our city is the housing crisis. Lack of stable housing has ripple effects on the lives of individuals, families, and communities. We have an affordable rental shortage of about 5,600 units, rents are increasing, and home ownership is further and further away for so many. We must invest more resources along the entirety of the housing continuum: emergency shelter, transitional housing, permanent supportive housing, affordable rentals, market rentals, and home ownership. With historic state revenues projected again this year, Las Cruces has an opportunity to fight for the resources we need.

The city has a great Housing and Neighborhood Services department and a Housing Policy Committee, which I chair, and we must work more collaboratively with stakeholders to encourage multi-income development in our infill areas. Infill development, done right, is unique to each existing area and neighborhood where it is undertaken. Finding innovative ways to weave new housing options into existing neighborhoods is a valuable space for collaboration between the city and local homebuilders. I also believe we must enact more incentives, like density bonuses, fee waivers, reduced parking requirements, fast-track processing, and reducing minimum lot sizes. Also, the two MRAs recently adopted in the El Paseo/S. Solano and W. Picacho corridors will be great economic development tools to encourage these kinds of public and private partnerships.

**5. Over the past few years, we have experienced a tremendous growth in residential & commercial building. We often hear concerns over the amount of time it takes for permitting, inspection, etc. in order to reach occupancy. It has also been stated that many of the City's policies actually increase the cost of building, which unfortunately, is passed on to the consumer. What is your plan to balance the policies of the City with a timely process from beginning to occupancy?**

I deeply believe in my definition of being business-friendly and know that the city is currently falling short of that standard. I have had several conversations with developers and business owners who have very valid concerns regarding our current processes. My role will be to ensure that our City Manager's office and the Community Development Department are consistently engaging with stakeholders to find ways to achieve that business-friendly status we all desire. I know the idea of a one-stop shop is important but is still not meeting the needs of the community. We must look at models like that implemented in El Paso and find ways to merge proven strategies with the processes that are working for Las Cruces. This is a place where I know tensions are high, but I also know that we can work closely with those directly impacted and our City Manager's office to find the right balance of safety, accountability, timeliness, and effectiveness.

**6. Ensuring the safety of our residents and businesses is paramount. What strategies do you propose to address and reduce crime in Las Cruces, while also building trust between law**

## **enforcement and the community?**

We must continue to address the recent surge in property crime with evidence-based solutions. I believe we must implement an Outreach (Homeless) Court as an extension of Municipal Court. This specialty court is a program aimed at a segment of the population that has limited means of complying with conditions of the court. As a result, misdemeanor charges are too often ignored until the individual is incarcerated, making the situation worse, as a criminal record will often impact their ability to get a job or find stable housing. Instead, this court would work with service providers, non-profit partners, the Crisis Triage Center, and others to get these individuals into wraparound services, job training, counseling, and/or community service that will interrupt the cycle of criminal activity. I would also like to create a community-based violence intervention program that allows for consistent peer-to-peer street outreach working to mitigate crime before it happens and connect folks to the services they need in order for us to interrupt cycles of violence.

During my term as a Councilor, the LCPD has received all resources and budgetary increases they have requested, including increased officer positions. The city also has new leadership in the Police Department, and I believe we have a great opportunity to work more closely with our PD by using data-driven approaches to retaining officers, training officers, lowering crime, and focusing on substance abuse that contribute to safety challenges. To support our officers and first responders, we must invest in mental health and substance use treatment resources and housing. We are consistently hearing from officers that they don't feel equipped or that they have the capacity to handle these challenges, nor should they have to. We have started tackling this issue by creating a crisis intervention team, which I was a lead on. Project LIGHT launched in March 2023 and is responding to behavioral health 911 calls with EMTs and Social Workers, not only freeing police officers to be able to respond to crime and violence more efficiently, but also providing the type of support needed in these situations. LIGHT is also an example of how we are working to connect people with resources and services they need to prevent crime, rather than simply reacting to these behaviors after the fact.

**7. Affordable housing is a concern for many residents and businesses. What steps do you plan to take to promote and facilitate the development of income-aligned housing in Las Cruces through your role on the Las Cruces City Council?**

Affordable housing is for everyone. Affordable housing means paying no more than 30% of one's gross income for rent/mortgage plus utilities. The reality though, is that even with 'affordable' housing, many in our community are still experiencing economic insecurity and have little left over to invest in their quality of life. With historic state revenues projected again this upcoming year, Las Cruces must work with our state legislators to ensure we get the funds we desperately need to meet our housing needs. There are two proven strategies that simply need more investment. One is permanent supportive housing – housing that helps get folks off the streets and into supportive housing. This includes behavioral and substance use treatment centers. The second is rapid rehousing programming, which focuses on preventative measures; rather than allowing folks to become homeless, we quickly transition them into housing. Both require serious investments and I believe now is our opportunity. I know I'm the right leader to help us achieve these goals.

## **Optional "just for fun" questions**

- **If you could have any superpower for a day, what would it be and how would you use it to benefit the residents of Las Cruces?**

I wish I had the power to heal, both physical wounds and those that we cannot see.

- **If you had the chance to invite any historical figure, living or dead, to dinner in**

**Las Cruces, who would it be and why? What would you talk about and where would you take them in our city?**

I would love to spend a day in Las Cruces with Archbishop Oscar Romero. Hopefully it's a Saturday on a cool fall day so we can have breakfast at Nessa's, head to the Farmer's Market, get a snack, then take my two dogs on a hike to Soledad Canyon. We'd then finish off the day with a cocktail at Dry Point and end with dinner at Salud de Mesilla.

- **If you could choose a theme song to represent your vision for Las Cruces, what song would it be and why?**