



AIA Richmond

2020 AIA Richmond Mayoral Election Candidate Questionnaire

The American Institute of Architects, Richmond Chapter (AIA Richmond) is a 501c6 organization made up of nearly 400 architects and emerging architects across metropolitan Richmond. AIA Richmond's mission is to foster creativity and elevate design while educating and serving our community. AIA Richmond's Community & Government Affairs committee has developed a questionnaire related to both the architecture and construction industry, and our greater community in general. AIA Richmond is not affiliated with any political party.

This questionnaire was delivered to all the on-ballot candidates for mayor on 08/31/2020, with a 3-week deadline for responses. We received responses from Mayor Levar Stoney and third district Council Representative Kim Gray only. Our questions are followed by each candidate's response:

1. Richmond City has been developing a Masterplan within a community engagement process. One of the plan's big moves is to evaluate and rework the city zoning as part of implementing the masterplan. Would this be part of your agenda and what process would you propose in revising the city zoning ordinances?

Gray: Community engagement is key to any governmental process, and certainly, when it comes to rezoning a neighborhood or district or updating a Master Plan. It takes responsible planning and compromise on the part of the government and the community to plan for smart growth that benefits all involved that benefits our city, our neighborhoods, and our residents. I will move forward with rezoning only with extensive outreach and discussion as well as the flexibility required given that the post-Covid world will change the way cities and neighborhoods are planned and grow. Also, I will direct staff to NOT waste months of time and money focused on massive top-down economic development projects like Navy Hill before they have been vetted or had input from the community. Having zoning in place before individual development projects can help reduce the degree of uncertainty that characterizes and weakens the Richmond development processes.

Stoney: I am incredibly proud of the work we have done so far with the Richmond 300 Masterplan, engaging the community and collecting input from all stakeholders to make sure that we are truly building One Richmond, a city that works for everyone. If Richmond wants to be more than a sleepy, southern city we must continue to grow, and that starts with zoning reform - relying less on single family zoning and instead moving to multifamily and mixed commercial zoning, especially through the Pulse corridor and our downtown core. A central focus of my second term will be to dramatically increase the available stock of affordable housing in the city, and that cannot happen until we allow for greater density and act intentionally to create mixed-income communities. Until the changes outlined in the Richmond 300 masterplan are made, our city will not have the tools to be able to sustain our much-needed growth. We must align our ordinances and regulations with our goals and priorities and I will work to accomplish that in my second term.

2. Concerning the Richmond 300 Masterplan:

a. What is your view of the proposed Richmond 300 "Big Moves" as outlined in the draft plan?

Gray: I think the "Big Moves" are very valuable guiding principles for our city to follow and implement in the coming years to realize a city that is healthier, more equitable, greener, safer, and more prosperous for all of us.

Stoney: I am fully committed to the Richmond 300 plan and the "Big Moves" section of the draft plan. As stated above, I strongly believe in the necessity of density and mixed dwellings and use development, increased housing opportunities, and ensuring environmental justice and equity for all Richmonders. My administration just recently announced the creation of five new parks in Southside, and we surpassed our 2023 goal of 1500 new affordable housing units built in the city. In my second term, I will utilize the Richmond 300 plan as our guiding document for environmental, economic, and housing policy for continued growth.

b. What will be your process for implementation of the final version of the plan?

Gray: The process for implementation of the city's Master Plan requires leadership, fortitude, and planning. It will require a mayor who is willing to make the tough changes to processes and old mentalities as well as lay out a budgetary roadmap that provides sustained progress toward the plan's goals, once adopted. To the extent possible, I would like to initiate consensus rezonings of specific parcels and areas in advance of private development proposals.

Stoney: The most important thing our city can do over the next decade is to align our resources and priorities to spur continued growth. To do this, we need an all-of-the-above strategy. This means implementing every piece of the Richmond 300 plan from zoning, to greenspace, to housing. However, everything must be approached with a growth mindset and an equity mindset. When the final report is completed, I plan to work with community members and other stakeholders to identify the resources - both financial and natural - needed to implement this plan fully. We have already begun this work in several areas such as increasing our greenspace and working on new, affordable housing. I am also prepared to go across the street to the General Assembly, as I have done many times before, to advocate for the priorities of our city.

c. Of all the items the masterplan outlines, what is your top item that you hope to carry out during your term?

Gray: The Master Plan is filled with helpful goals that must be pursued together. Adding greenspace, rethinking priority growth areas, adjustments to zoning codes, reconnecting our city and rethinking city facilities are all important, and I would define success as a mayor who not only drives the master planning process forward each year but also ensures that the neighborhoods and community are partners in this effort. This plan is for the community and designed by the community and it should be implemented and driven forward by the community. Where there is that consensus, we may initiate specific rezonings to implement the Plan and we may identify the necessary financial support (e.g., incentives or infrastructure) to achieve those community goals.

Stoney: Responses to parts b and c were together, in b, above.

3. *What are your proposals for improving our City's parks and recreational areas? This includes not only high-visibility areas like the riverfront, but also park and recreational improvements in communities where these facilities are now very limited.*

Gray: I believe expanding and protecting our parks and recreation areas are vital to the future of our city. I helped expand Laurus Park by adding 18 acres as well as adding land to Crooked Branch Ravine Park and placing conservation easements on both. I believe more actions like these are needed for our other green spaces to protect the ones that exist and add to areas that need it, especially in parts of the city where there is little or no green space or recreational options. In places like Scott's Addition or Gilpin Court, I have emphasized and proposed creative solutions like an urban deck across I-95 or a new bike trail on abandoned CSX rights-of-way. Sadly, the Riverfront Plan has been abandoned by the mayor and needs to be returned to the budget and implemented even if it is only piece-by-piece, year by year. The river is one the regions' most cherished asset and the Riverfront Plan, like the Master Plan is an excellent guiding document.

Stoney: Earlier this September, I announced five new parks in Richmond's Southside, the first new parks in Richmond in decades. This announcement will help to meet the 10-minute walk to a park goal outlined in the Richmond 300 Plan, and it will create dozens of acres of new green space and tree canopy in a historically redlined community. We must also consider expanding our parks system with an emphasis on reducing the heat-island effect. For too long, Black and Brown communities have lived in neighborhoods that are significantly hotter than other parts of the city because of the lack of tree canopy. Because of this, my administration will continue to prioritize growing our tree canopy in the Southside and East End to ensure that we are focused on environmental equity.

During my first term, I also took other steps to help grow our parks and greenspace throughout the city. In 2018, I created a major conservation easement, protecting over 260 acres of the James River Park System. On December 5, 2019, I issued a proclamation in support of Richmond joining the Biophilic Cities Network, meaning that the city will focus on accessible nature in which humans and wildlife can both thrive. Earlier this year, I announced the creation of the Green Team - which is tasked with identifying pieces of city-owned land that can be converted to parks and green space to help us reach our ten-minute walk to a park goal. The Green Team will continue to recommend additional parcels, using equity-centered data. During my second term, I will continue to expand these efforts not only to see our green space expand, but also as an environmental justice issue where Black and Brown communities have equal access to green space.

4. *How do you propose to improve and expand the public transportation in Richmond, as well as connecting to surrounding areas where many of the region's jobs are located? How do you propose to expand transportation to the underserved neighborhoods?*

Gray: The new regional transportation authority created by the state will greatly improve the regions' transportation options and connectivity with additional annual funding that will allow the city to go far beyond what we have done in the past. It is an opportunity to broaden our transit network and create a modern system that has long been lacking. The city leadership needs to make sure GRTC continues to study and adjust routes and connectivity as necessary to serve those in need. Our leadership must also work cooperatively with our regional partners to make sure anyone can get to a job anywhere in the region and ensure that the new authority revenues are focused on more than just roads but true transit options. The biggest mistake we can make is to put the majority of the regional transportation authority funding into existing services. Mayor Stoney apparently sees this approach as a way to fund some of his other proposals.

Stoney: Our region must do better when it comes to equitable access to transit. That is why I was a major proponent of the passage of the Central Virginia Transportation Authority. This new authority will allow tens of millions of state dollars to be set aside for transit and transportation infrastructure projects in the Richmond area. As Chair of the Finance Committee, it's my hope that we can greatly expand bus service within the city and routes into the counties. I also support

a permanent elimination of bus fares on the GRTC and Pulse. Transit fees are a barrier to economic mobility and this will help countless working families. During my first term, I also invested \$785,000 in route enhancements and supported the redesign of the bus system to allow greater access in communities who need bus service the most. This past week, I also announced the creation of the Office of Equitable Transit and Mobility, which will oversee most of the work I have highlighted above.

5. *With regard to the COVID-19 pandemic:*

a. *What are your proposals for limiting the spread of Covid-19 in our communities, especially concerning the disproportionate effect it has had on minority populations? What citywide education efforts on hygiene practices would you propose to avoid the spread of Covid-19 or other future health scares?*

Gray: We know that concentrated populations like nursing homes, jails, and schools are the source of our worst outbreaks. The simplest practice the City could undertake would be to ensure that every RPS child has a functioning computer and access to broadband. That would protect students, parents, teachers, and staff alike. Unfortunately, this may be single biggest failing of this Administration.

Stoney: As mayor, my top priority during the pandemic has been keeping the people of Richmond safe while supporting the local economy. My administration will continue to listen to the scientists and experts, centering their recommendations at the heart of our COVID-19 response. That's why I was one of the first mayors to immediately focus on testing, tracing infections, and isolating those with the virus - even providing hotel rooms for those who couldn't easily quarantine. When the data indicated Richmond should mandate masks and delay Phase 1 of Virginia's reopening plan, I asked Governor Northam for both, and Northam said yes. We provided safety gear to low-income communities, authorized \$14 million in funding to assist with rent payments and hold off evictions, offered interest-free small business disaster loans and grants to local businesses, partnered with the YMCA to provide childcare to essential workers, and worked with restaurants to develop expanded outdoor seating and meals for first responders.

Additionally, my administration secured a \$250,000 grant from the Open Society Foundation to provide rent and mortgage assistance to immigrant families, requested Governor Northam allow restaurants to serve cocktails to-go, created RVAStrong.org to be a resource hub for residents to request and offer assistance, requested federal support on behalf of restaurant owners to get the Paycheck Protection Plan fixed to allow more flexibility, worked with the Robins Family Foundation to create the Family Crisis Fund which gives families in need \$500 reloadable gift cards to help with essential items. I also asked the local health district to change the reporting structure for COVID-19 data -- breaking down cases by race to understand the effects of the pandemic on our communities of color.

b. *How will your administration assist those industries, like the entertainment, retail, hospitality and restaurant industries, most directly affected by the pandemic?*

Gray: I have already and will continue to advocate and introduce programs for small business assistance in reaction to the effect the pandemic has had on our local community. Furthermore, I will direct the Economic Development Authority to focus on being the small business incubator and loan provider it is supposed to be instead of asking them to deal with big, shiny, projects.

Stoney: I will continue these efforts and provide experienced, steady leadership to help navigate our community through this crisis. Public health education starts in communities, and I know the Virginia Department of Health and our local health district have done a great job educating our community members about the dangers of COVID-19 and have provided resources and information to prevent the spread and future infection. I will continue to support VDH and their

mission, and I will continue our efforts and partnerships with philanthropic and corporate partners, like those listed above, to educate the public on infectious disease prevention.

6. How will your administration solidify positive changes in regard to social equity and the elimination of institutional racism in our Richmond community? How could you see the architectural and design community as a resource in enacting your plan?

Gray: I would call on this organization to help me understand the process, strengths and weaknesses of phasing public housing residents into newer housing. Mayor Stoney has signed a letter calling for the demolition of more public housing projects, but with no plan and no chance for a rational relocation plan. When we condemn properties for highways or sewers, we purchase the properties and relocate tenants. We owe at least this standard of care to the residents of our public housing projects. We also need to conduct any such process mindful of the need to preserve community and family connections.

Stoney: As mayor, I have consistently directed city government to identify racial inequities and structural racism at every level of city government and empowered them to make direct organizational changes to their departments. At a budgetary level, my administration fought for additional tax dollars to directly fund new schools in Black and Brown neighborhoods in the Southside and East End. Equitable access to a high-quality education can be the great equalizer for Richmond kids, and my administration has invested more new monies in RPS in more than a generation. I have brought this same mentality to other city services such as street paving, sidewalk construction and repair, GRTC route enhancements, and parks and recreation. During my first term, I also introduced, and City Council approved, legislation calling for a citywide racial equity study and racial equity training for city employees. I know other cities have worked with organizations like the Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE) to implement this type of project, and I look forward to this important work. Moreover, I have asked all of my Executive Cabinet members to identify city policies and programs within their portfolios that need to become more equitable.

In my next term, I will continue to focus on racial equity by launching universal pre-K for three and four year olds. Right now, 59% of Richmond children are unprepared to learn on their first day of Kindergarten and this investment will help close that gap. I also plan to make increasing Black homeownership a primary focus. Since 2000, Richmond has seen a more than 30% decrease in Black homeownership, while white homeownership has increased by over 150%. Moving forward, I will continue racial justice and equity in every facet of city life and government including education and housing. I hope to work with the architecture and design community as partners in progress helping my administration understand best practices from the private sector to address our city's greatest challenges.

7. How will your administration address the empty spaces where monuments have been removed along Monument Avenue?

Gray: In 2019, I proposed and still support adding a monument to the fourteen U.S. Colored Troops on Monument Avenue that helped win the Civil War and liberate Richmond. I believe that the community must be engaged and deliberate what (or whom) we want to honor on our city streets. I believe the architectural and design community could play a valuable role in offering their services and expertise in that dialogue to create the vision that will showcase Richmond' growth and change for the 21st century.

Stoney: I am committed to a robust, community driven conversation about how to best use the space now available on Monument Avenue. Any process should be inclusive and include robust community engagement with residents and historically underrepresented voices to help us tell the true story of Richmond.

8. *Climate change is a key issue that needs to be addressed. AIA seeks to prioritize actions minimizing the built environment's impact on the ecosystem including reducing greenhouse gases and increasing renewable energy sources. What policies will your administration put in place to advance these efforts and other climate issues?*

Gray: In addition to the aforementioned creation of more greenspace citywide, adding to parks and creating conservation easements, the city must do more to increase its urban tree canopy, especially in areas like the housing courts, and we must work to increase energy efficiency of city buildings (and schools), and begin the transition to an electric fleet in future budgets. Again, I would rely on the professional expertise of this group to provide unbiased and objective analyses of these many options BEFORE we embark on a course of action (instead of announcing a media-driven course of action and expecting the communities and stakeholders to fall in line).

Stoney: In 2017, I announced our comprehensive climate and clean energy plan for the city, [RVAGreen2050](#). I am committed to implementing and expanding on that program and would welcome any input and assistance the AIA would be willing to offer. As mentioned before, on December 5, 2019, I issued a proclamation in support of Richmond joining the Biophilic Cities Network, meaning that the city will focus on accessible nature in which humans and wildlife thrive. This effort, along with our work on increasing access to public transit and creating new green space, will guide our work on responsible, climate-conscious development in Richmond.

9. *Demand for housing in Richmond has risen for the last decade and is projected to continue. With this, there is also a continued need for affordable housing.*

a. *The City of Richmond already has affordable housing initiatives in place. How do you plan to either strengthen or reform these initiatives to ensure tangible results?*

Gray: The city needs to annually and incrementally increase the budget of the affordable housing trust fund as well as create incentives that will freeze property tax rates for those in need or those that are long term residents of Richmond. Further, we must enforce city policies that direct developers who buy city owned land to designate a minimum number of units for affordable housing - and do so using the statistics that define affordable housing (and thus rents) by city median income, not the regional median income (which is much higher).

Stoney: Housing is one of the most important issues our city must tackle in the next four years. As mentioned above, since 2000, Richmond has seen a more than 30% decrease in Black homeownership, while white homeownership has increased by over 150%. I will make increasing Black homeownership a top priority in my second term. We will do this by creating greater density through zoning reform and a shift to building more mixed-income communities within the city. But we must also look at the city's public housing stock. The first public housing in Richmond was built in the 1940's, meant to be temporary housing post-WWII. That housing still stands today, and the families that live there are living in dilapidated buildings in conditions not worthy of our great city. Moving forward I believe we need to transform and redevelop public housing, and guarantee each and every resident who lives in public housing today has a place in the City of Richmond tomorrow. During my next term, I will work with stakeholders to build new housing dispersed throughout the city, while also ensuring that current residents are not displaced from their neighborhoods throughout the city. All of this will be further supported by the implementation of the Richmond 300 plan.

b. How would you address systemic housing barriers for many low-income persons, first-time renters, and people with arrest and conviction records?

Gray: The city must expand more housing types throughout the city and allow greater density, especially along major transit corridors and create incentives to convert vacant land into housing opportunities for low-income or first time buyers/renters.

Stoney: We must do more though. I will work with the General Assembly, as I have done successfully many times as mayor, to create new, progressive tax abatement and tax deferral programs to incentivize affordable housing development and keep current homeowners in their homes. I will also work with the Maggie Walker Community Land Trust to renovate blighted properties to get more homes on the market at lower prices, also helping us increase our tax base.. By expanding affordable homeownership options, incentivizing affordable development, and transforming public housing, we are lowering the barriers for many vulnerable communities.

10. The permitting process in the City of Richmond is slow and multi-headed. This adds time and expense on the part of both the permit applicants and the City staff, which adversely effects attracting and retaining developers, especially smaller ones, in our City. How would you propose to improve and streamline the process, such as hiring an IT specialist to streamline the process? What other jurisdictions are you looking at in order to model the process for the City of Richmond? See examples provided:

Gray: The permitting process in the city is broken. It's a disgrace and been a total failure of leadership from the mayor. Not having a good permits and inspections department costs us millions annually. Homeowners, business owners, and contractors are waiting two or more MONTHS to get plans approved and inspections scheduled. That is simply unacceptable. As mayor, I will bring in the right leader with an experienced track record of success to fix Room 110 from top to bottom and we will issue permits and inspections in a timely manner, offer more efficient service, modernize the technology (including sending confirmation emails), and improve working conditions and morale among the staff. Cincinnati is good a model to follow and is led by Art Dahlberg, who some will remember ran permitting here in Richmond until 2009. Their operation is top notch. By providing the leadership and improving the workplace, we can fix Room 110. It will help all Richmonders. It's good economic development. It creates jobs. It saves people money. And it is good for the growth of our city.

Stoney: We have seen unprecedented growth in Richmond over the last four years, and we've also seen permitting requests increase exponentially, including double the requests from last year to this year. While we have more than doubled the amount of permits we are processing a year and hired new leadership with Jason Carangelo as Building Commissioner and Sharon Ebert as DCAO for Economic and Community Development, there is still more work to be done. First, we must work on hiring and retaining staff in the permitting office. This means not only investing more in technology, but also offering competitive wages and benefits to stop staff leaving for better jobs in other localities. I have full confidence in the new department leadership to implement additional reforms, and I would welcome more feedback and recommendations on how to better streamline the process.

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