

1. Name & office you are seeking: \*

Justin Ponton, City council, ward 2.

## Private Property Rights

2. What does "support for the rights of private property owners" mean to you? \*

Supporting the rights of private property owners to me means defending the notion that individuals should maintain the freedom to possess, control and use their private property in any matter that they see fit so long as it's within the confines of the law and does not infringe upon the rights of others. The right of an individual to acquire and possess property is guaranteed under the state of Montana's Constitution and as such I believe in that inalienable right.

3. Can you think of an example when the city government should NOT fully recognize private property rights? \*

I believe the city government should always recognize private property rights. I also think that the city government has a role to play as it pertains to land use planning and zoning so that growth and development can take place and do so responsibly while also ensuring that the city is meeting the current needs of the residents in the community.

## Housing Affordability, Availability & Non-discrimination

4. What are your thoughts about Accessory Dwelling Units? \*

I'm a proponent of ADUs and from a policy perspective I think the city should promote ADU permit approvals and not introduce additional regulations as barriers to their construction. There are a number of case studies and data points from across the country that point to ADUs as being an effective tool in combating a housing shortage. Additionally, coming back to the question of property rights, I believe it's the right of a property owner to construct an ADU if they feel that, that investment is the best use for their property.

5. What are your thoughts about Short-Term Rentals? \*

Tourism is a critical component of our local and state economies in Montana and with that comes a local need for short-term lodging. Based on the most recent data I could find, the number of short-term rentals in Missoula has hovered around 1% of overall housing supply and has remained consistent for several years, suggesting that there has not been a meaningful increase in the number of housing units being converted to short-term rentals. The local need is there for short-term lodging. Operating a short-term rental is an investment in our local economy since it provides property and income tax revenue and also provides lodging for visitors and tourists who are also investing their dollars in our local economy. Having utilized short-term rentals in my own travels, I'm a proponent of them both from a personal and policy perspective. Over the years I think the city council has done the right thing in voting down any new short-term rental regulations and I would encourage the council to continue to do so.

6. What are your thoughts on market-rate housing and development? \*

According to the Five Valleys Housing Report on the Missoula Organization of Realtors site, there have been only 5 quarters out of the last 21 (representative of Q1 2020 through Q1 2025) where the Missoula Urban Area has reported having a "normal" amount of housing supply. The other 16 quarters represent being in an "under-supply" housing market. It's worth noting that even during those 5 quarters in the last 5+ years, this metric just barely hit the bottom-end of the scale needed to be classified as "normal." The reason for citing the Housing Report here is simple, the data clearly shows what most Missoulians already know which is, we need more housing supply. That being said, the city needs to work with developers to provide incentives and encourage the construction of new housing which by and large in terms of volume should be market-rate since that's where the most demand is. A lot of work has gone into the city's land use plan which heavily focuses on the need for more housing and I think in the last two-years we've seen a lot of new market-rate development taking place to try and fill that supply gap. I think going forward the city needs to continue the work on adopting the code reform as a way to carry out the goals of the land use plan.

7. What action can the City take to help with housing affordability and availability? \*

I think the affordability component is driven in part by the availability component. Tying back into the last question, increasing housing supply by encouraging more construction is one of the most effective ways we as a city can combat a lack of inventory. New development adds more units which gives residents more housing options and having more inventory may also help provide some downward pressure on pricing since there will be more competition in the marketplace. Additionally, in keeping with a priority of the land use plan I think the city needs to continue its focus on encouraging the development where we have the most housing need. In looking at the Five Valleys Housing Report data, it's not surprising that the biggest supply gaps exist for homes priced between \$300,000 - \$600,000 and I think that this is where the emphasis and focus needs to be.

8. REALTORS® believe in fair housing policies, anti-discrimination and opportunity for all. What does “fair housing” mean to you, and can you give an example of it? \*

I too am a believer in fair housing policies and opportunity for all. To me, fair housing is the belief that there is simply no place in our society for any type of actions that discriminate or are prejudicial towards individuals exercising their freedom and right to secure the housing of their choosing.

After attending UM, I lived and worked in New York City for about 7 years. I spent almost all of that time working for a large publicly traded real estate investment trust. When I left the company to move back to Montana, I was one of only a few general managers for this company in the northeast market. During my tenure, I managed commercial spaces, thousands of residential rentals and oversaw quite a few different teams. The reason for the background is simply to say that upholding fair housing policies in the day to day operations of the organization was part of our identity. There was no place and a zero tolerance policy on our team for violating any fair housing principles and that was something that I routinely instilled in my direct reports.

## Infrastructure & Transportation

9. There are many planned infrastructure projects in Missoula. What is one that hasn't been addressed that you'd like to see and why? \*

I'll start by saying that I'm a proponent of the riverfront triangle project that Mayor Davis announced at the end of June. This is land that in my opinion has long been an area of opportunity that I think will be a good addition to the downtown Missoula area. Going forward my hope is that this development will be a catalyst for further development of other vacant or dilapidated parcels along the Broadway corridor between Russell and Front Streets. In terms of infrastructure I think one of our greatest challenges and opportunities as a city lies with Reserve Street. I'm watching the Reserve Street action plan as it progresses and once the data collection component is complete my expectation for the city is that we'll look to enhance safety and traffic flow along Reserve. I think there are far too many uncontrolled intersections and areas with poor visibility for other users like cyclists and pedestrians and we need to make changes to improve safe travel. Something else I think we need to invest in is better lighting throughout the city. There are a lot of neighborhoods with little or no street lights and the same can be said for roadways, I'm specifically thinking about Mullan and Reserve Streets which are both very high traffic roadways and both poorly lit in sections.

10. What are the biggest opportunities Missoula has in infrastructure and transportation when it comes to housing and growth demands? \*

In short, I think the biggest concern here is housing growth outpacing our infrastructure and transportation network. There are a number of residents that are reliant on the bus system for transportation. I think the city needs to continue to lean into the Mountain Line partnership through collaborative study to ensure the routes and schedules offered continue to meet the needs of residents as the housing footprint changes in the city. Like I mentioned above I also think we need to seriously consider a number of functional changes to Reserve Street given the number of cars, cyclists and pedestrians that use it everyday. Ultimately, I think as Missoula grows, the infrastructure network needs to grow alongside it responsibly. Focusing in on the area where I live, I think there have been some road projects that were meant to help cope with the large increase in number of residents living west of Reserve. However I think some of the projects on Mullan haven't produced the most efficient outcomes and feel like we could have used those tax dollars in better ways. A quick example is the Mullan roundabout lane changes depending which way you go. As you head west on Mullan, the roundabouts at Mary Jane and George Elmer require you to stick to the inside most lane to go straight. If you're going east however, going straight means sticking to the outside lane. I think based on the lane change, limited signage and poor painted lines, navigating these has become unnecessarily inefficient and I often see firsthand cars close to colliding. Another example is the road width on George Elmer/England as you approach the McNett Flats and West End Farms development. In my opinion that roadway was developed far too narrowly. McNett Flats I believe has a total of over 600 apartments and that road is a main thoroughfare for residents and any traffic trying to connect from Mullan to W Broadway etc. Given how narrow that street is and the fact that cars park on each shoulder, it's extremely close when two cars are driving side by side. What's worse is that pedestrians, pets, children etc. are very difficult to see at crosswalks. Overall, I think this area could have been engineered differently to increase safety and flow of traffic. I think as the number of homes in the West End Farms area continues to grow, we may need to consider ways to improve the traffic flow and pedestrian safety.

11. What is your position on connecting the City sewer and water to communities outside the current City limits? \*

In the interest of full transparency I need to know more about this issue before I can develop a position one way or the other. I've done some cursory research but I need to hear more detail from experts on both sides of this before I can take a position. My apologies, this just isn't an issue I've had any exposure to as of yet.

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## Economic Development

### 12. What do you see as the primary challenges in Missoula's Commercial Real Estate development? \*

These issues aren't exclusive to Missoula by any means but the challenges that commercial real estate development in our community is facing boils down to the costs of developing projects. I think most impactful are interest rates, construction costs and the cost of land in Missoula. Also worth noting, construction costs are high right now but there's also an additional layer of uncertainty as the tariff landscape continues to change. The tariff rates on building materials including steel, aluminum, Canadian wood etc. have fluctuated a lot lately which simply makes budgeting and planning for a project that much more difficult. This is only an anecdotal observation but I would also assume that two factors from the buyer or renter perspective have added barriers to commercial development and that is the quantity of remote v office based employees and the simple cost of selling goods today. By that I mean if you're considering opening a brick and mortar store for your small business to sell something, cost of labor can be high along with being challenging to find. I would say rent is likely going to be high, capital is expensive, construction for build-outs and remodels are expensive and there's a good chance that the production of your goods is high (see above uncertainty around tariffs as that definitely applies here as well). With those challenges in mind for the potential buyer or renter of a commercial space, I have to assume that the pool of potential candidates is lower today than say 5 years ago so that definitely would have an impact to the commercial developer's thought process and planning as well.

### 13. Which stakeholders would you contact as trusted sources on topics of economic development? \*

I think this probably varies based on the exact content and context but I think the Missoula Economic Partnership is a great resource. I know the city works closely with that organization and relies on their expertise as do other business leaders in the community. Just in my time as a candidate thus far I've often turned to their study on "The Economic Impact of Homeless in Missoula" so I would consider them as a trusted source. I think the Missoula Redevelopment Agency is another great organization and source of guidance when it comes to local economic development. Outside of that I'd look to engage with local experts on whatever the subject matter is. Having grown up in Missoula I feel fortunate to have a number of contacts who are subject matter experts across various industries that I would trust to weigh-in and provide guidance.

### 14. What is your definition of a "healthy real estate market" from both a commercial and residential point of view? \*

Interesting question! At face value I think one barometer here is simply, could a household earning 100% of the AMI find housing options that fit their need and keep mortgage and insurance under 28 or so percent of their gross income? Today, based on AMI and approximate interest rates, that would mean housing options in Missoula for around \$265K. In that price range, there are unfortunately very limited options which we looked at in a previous question and know that there's an under supply at that home price. I think this is why our focus needs to be on development opportunities and also ones that provide more options for home buyers at the entry level price ranges and for first time buyers since that's where the greatest need is at. I also think a healthy market is one where capital is obtainable. The unfortunate reality for a lot of people right now is that the cost of borrowing is pricing them out of home ownership. Additionally, people that want to move into a different space (think out of their first home and into a larger space) can't because they by and large don't want to swap a 3% interest rate mortgage for a 6.5% interest rate mortgage. That domino effect means that their starter home isn't made available for the next first-time buyer to purchase like we could previously rely on happening. In quick summary, I think an idyllic "healthy" market is one with around 6 months of residential housing supply at various price ranges, interest rates are a factor in home-buying but aren't precluding most from being able to own homes, residents at varying levels of the AMI scale are able to find and afford housing options and finally, building costs are such that it allows for affordable housing options to be constructed to meet local demand. On the commercial side I think a lot of these same principles apply, in a healthy market construction and borrowing costs are such that it allows developers to take on projects to meet local demand, local government is largely an advocate for commercial development and there is more certainty around costs in the form of building materials.

## Taxation & Fiscal Responsibility

15. Share your thoughts on real estate property taxes and some options the city could explore to demonstrate fiscal responsibility that might alleviate property taxes. \*

My thoughts on property taxes are that they're simply costing Missoula residents too much money. Residents trying to buy housing are facing an uphill battle on every front with limited housing inventory and pricing near all-time highs, high interest rates, high insurance premiums and high property taxes. The city has limited means in trying to tackle all of these issues but specific to property taxes I think the best tool available is budgetary responsibility which to me looks like operating a balanced budget and looking at alternative revenue sources. I think there's a potential option to look at implementing a local resort tax on certain industries and using those funds to offset the property tax burden.

16. What would you do as an elected official to demonstrate fiscal discipline? \*

I would advocate for a balanced budget and I would be transparent about the conversations and decision-making happening around budgeting. I would also seek to work with the Mayor's office and the other council members during the budget review process to ensure we're working collaboratively and we're fostering an environment where all perspectives and ideas are considered.

## Community Engagement & Governance

17. Share a few current community issues where you think collaboration with REALTORS® would benefit the greater community. \*

I think there have been good examples in the past of public-private partnerships where Realtors have been advocates and I think that is a great thing for the community. I think West End Farms has been a good recent example. With the announcement of the riverfront triangle project perhaps there's an opportunity there for further collaboration. As I mentioned previously I'm hopeful that the project is the first of many along the Broadway corridor so hopefully there are other opportunities in the future as well. Something else that comes to mind deals with property safety best practices. Since Realtor brokers and appraisers are so dialed-in to the specifics of properties in our community my thought was that they could be a great resource and voice for some public outreach in the vein of safety (i.e. wildfire prevention, utilities shut-offs, basic electrical etc).

18. What organizations in the community are your "go to" for building strategies in commercial development and housing? \*

I think similar to the economic development question above, I would lean into the local resources that I know are well-versed on the economic landscape of Missoula today and could offer guidance when we're looking at making commercial or residential development based decisions. Some of those include MEP and MRA and if we're considering development projects, I think Mike Nugent would be a great resource as well as Chair of the Land Use and Planning Committee as well as being a local tenured Realtor. Outside of that I think there are a number of local experts in commercial and residential housing, including MOR and its members, that I could hopefully reach out to for discussion on potential projects or ideas.

19. Do you volunteer in the community, and if so, where? \*

While I lived in New York, I volunteered with an organization called Operation Backpack. Their mission was to help underprivileged children succeed in school by collecting school supply donations and then assemble those supplies into backpacks and deliver them to children. I don't currently have any volunteer roles in the Missoula community but I'm hopeful that a seat on city council will be an opportunity for me to give something back.

Please answer the prompt below:

20. Treasurer's Name, Address, Email Address & Phone Number \*

Barbara Berens  
PO Box 383 Missoula, 59806  
justinformissoula@gmail.com | 406.544.2971

Please answer the following question below:

21. Will you accept PAC contributions?

☒ Yes

☐ No