

Candidate Questionnaire
Grand Junction City Council
April 8, 2025 Election

Laurel Cole

1. What qualifications and experience do you have that can give voters confidence you should be a member of the Grand Junction City Council? Please be specific.

I bring a wealth of experience in nonprofit management, encompassing budget creation and balancing. My policy advocacy efforts have focused on promoting affordable homeownership at the local, state, and federal level, and I have been deeply involved in community engagement over the past four years including serving on the ARPA committee and sustainability committees for the City of Grand Junction. I am currently working on the Housing Stability Implementation workgroup for the City, a diverse group of stakeholders in the community working to create long-term and short-term solutions for the unhoused population.

As the Executive Director of Habitat for Humanity of Mesa County, I serve on the advocacy committee and as a board member for the state support office, Habitat Colorado. I have been actively involved in shaping state-level policy to ensure affordable homeownership is included in housing affordability measures.

In Arizona, I served on the advisory board for the director of the Human Services division for Maricopa County. In this role, we reviewed the organizational structure of the division and implemented and managed organizational changes for the following programs: Community Resilience, Housing Services, Early Education, Senior/Adult Services, Homeless Services, and Workforce Development.

My expertise lies in strategic planning and implementation, driving organizational change, and maintaining strong, transparent communication with the public. I have contributed my skills to several committees and advisory boards for the City of Grand Junction, as well as for Maricopa County's Human Services division.

I am a firm believer in transparent communication, community feedback, and fiscal accountability. I am confident that these strengths will enable me to excel in this role.

2. In looking back over the past year, are there decisions the Grand Junction City Council made with which you do not agree? If yes, how would you have changed them?

Over the past year, so much has happened- some city staff decisions and others council decisions, but the major concern I have is a lack of transparency. As a nonprofit leader, I strive to ensure information and decisions are transparent to the public and feel that this is crucial for our local government as well. Community feedback needs to be improved, and earlier in the process. Information should not be hard for a regular member of the community to access. While not every decision can or should be based on community feedback, information needs to be accessible to the public.

3. What approach would you take in dealing with intergovernmental relations and resolving intergovernmental conflicts?

I believe that collaboration of intergovernmental agencies provides better results for the community. By working with the County and surrounding towns, we can address larger issues that impact all our communities together. Intergovernmental conflicts should be addressed by identifying the issue, identifying the conflict, communicating and listening to all perspectives, exploring alternatives, and collaboratively developing a compromise that addresses the original issue. When all parties can remain focused on the original issue they are trying to resolve, solutions can usually be reached. Taking a wide-angle perspective on the community, we are all residents of the same place and there are issues that cross determined boundaries and can be addressed through collaborative approaches.

4. Affordable housing has been identified as a problem in Grand Junction that affects large segments of our City's population, including young people, families, and the elderly. What actions do you think the City should take to address affordable housing?

A comprehensive solution to housing affordability requires more than just the City's efforts; it demands a collaborative and innovative approach involving developers, builders, nonprofit housing organizations, stakeholders, and community members. The City of Grand Junction can take several steps to promote affordable development, such as reducing impact fees for smaller homes and incentivizing the creation of homes that can be sold below market rate by simplifying building designs and materials. Given the high demand for affordable housing, these lower-cost homes would sell quickly, and with reduced building costs, profit margins could be maintained while increasing the availability of affordable homes. Additionally, the City can streamline the planning process to expedite approvals, thereby reducing developers' carrying costs and ultimately lowering the price of the final product. More solutions can be reached through a real collaborative approach.

5. Homelessness has been identified as problem in Grand Junction. What actions do you think the City should take to address homelessness?

Homelessness is a layered problem with multiple contributing factors. Mental health, addiction, life altering events, lack of economic opportunities, and high-cost housing all contribute to the growth of the unhoused population. The City can support economic development which creates more jobs that pay more money as well as incentivizing affordable housing in a way that works for more developers/builders, but there is an immediate need as well. More transitional housing and permanent supportive housing are needed in our community to help people experiencing homelessness, but these options are expensive and require a large amount of subsidy to develop and run. Mesa County is also lacking dual diagnosis services, which treat both mental illness and addiction together, which is imperative to forging successful paths forward. With so many different aspects to consider, the best approach is to continue with an interagency collaboration that can implement knowledge and experience into creating solutions that

may have better outcomes. The city needs to identify ways to create solutions and through such partnerships, implement such solutions that have both immediate and long-term impact.

6. Economic development is listed as one of Grand Junction's strategic priorities. How do you assess the merits and effectiveness of the City's economic development strategy?

In many cases, it is hard to determine the effectiveness of the City's economic development strategies. I prefer data that demonstrates the effectiveness of an initiative, however economic development is not always so easily measured. In addition to reviewing data provided by economic partners such as the Grand Junction Chamber of Commerce, Grand Junction Economic Partnership, and Business Incubator Center, Council should be reviewing policies to ensure that they will not have a negative impact on existing and new businesses in the area. I also believe that collaboration provides better results, and that by involving stakeholders in the process early, we can prevent unintentional negative impacts to economic development.

7. Please comment on the City's Strategic Framework for 2024-2026 as it relates to the City's budget and capital plans. Are there City expenditures that you think should be increased or decreased?

The current Strategic Framework for 2024-2026 concerns me, as the priorities outlined do not match the needs of the community. While I believe that the goals outlined might be high priorities in the future, our community has basic needs that are not being met and a City that is expending more funds than they have. This means some core needs are not being addressed while other projects are moving forward. Grand Junction has many problems to prioritize before spending funds on recreational gathering places. With a limited budget, we should be prioritizing those needs before wants.

8. What do you believe are three other important issues and/or concerns facing the City of Grand Junction and what solutions do you have in mind?

- a. Multimodal transportation- In recent years, Colorado has adopted a multimodal transportation plan, and the City of Grand Junction has been following suit. The idea is to improve mobility through integrating various transportation options such as cars, public transit, bicycles, walking, and freight with a focus on creating a balanced and accessible system for all residents. As we move forward, it is important to plan for accessible transportation in a way that makes sense for our community. While increasing accessibility, it is important to ensure that you are not negatively impacting access for others. Grand Junction is an aging community, as well as a sprawled community, which makes nonmotorized transportation less than optimal for many residents. I think we can do a better job of increasing access through efficient public transportation options, which would better meet the needs of many members of the community in addition to adding bike lanes in a way that is safer for both cyclists and motorists.

Restore the Balance Questionnaire

- b. Mental health- Grand Junction is in desperate need of high-quality mental health services along with dual diagnose services that address mental health and addiction together. This is also a high need for the chronically unhoused population to get the services they need for success.
 - c. Community Engagement- This has been a consistent theme that has come up in nearly every meeting I have had with stakeholders and residents during this campaign. The community is requesting more transparency, better and clearer communication, and the opportunity to provide meaningful feedback earlier in the planning process. When possible, Council and City Staff should be working to better these processes to improve outcomes and increase understanding of policies and projects.
9. By now, you have read and considered the seven political principles we feel should guide political conduct in Western Colorado. Please give us your opinion on the merits of the principles and let us know if you are willing to observe them.
- a. I agree with most of the political principles listed. We cannot make change when engaging in political gridlock and common ground is the place where solutions are forged. I do find that the phrasing in principle two is a bit unattainable, as sometimes decisions must be made in best judgement and with the facts presented but cannot always be supported with irrefutable evidence in all cases. I do believe that facts should be the basis of decision-making processes, and ensuring the data received/presented is valid is a crucial step. I love the portion that discusses the ability to listen to and understand both sides of a debate as a prerequisite for finding practical solutions and hope to use this as a member of City Council regularly. I also believe that public interest must come before party interest, and as a member of a nonpartisan City Council, we should all remember this. For the rest of the principles, I believe they hold merit and I am willing to observe all of the listed principles.