



YOUR VOICE ON THE CITY COUNCIL

The following are responses to questions posed by the Ravinia Neighbors Association for their March 2 candidate forum. For more information you can reach me at 847-606-5313 or LauraSaret.com or FriendsOfLauraSaret@gmail.com.

Question 1: Reasons for seeking a position on the Highland Park (HP) City Council

I am seeking a two-year position on the City Council to replace Paul Frank, who resigned to serve on the County Board. I am running to ensure that your voice is heard on issues that affect HP. Like you, I care about HP and want to play an active role making our city a safer, better place to live, work, and run a business for all residents—including singles, young couples, those who are raising a family, and empty-nesters who want to “age in place.”

What distinguishes me from my competitors is my combined business, education, and volunteer experiences. In addition, as a retiree, I have no full-time job to distract me from being a Councilman, and I bring experiences and a view of HP that differs from those currently on the Council. There are currently no retirees on the Council. I also have no business interests in HP that might interfere with my judgment.

I am not a politician, but I have always been involved in “politics” whether it was as Faculty President at Oakton Community College, President of Oakton’s State University Annuitants Association chapter, or serving on political campaigns. The political situation in our country and state as well as gripes from my neighbors and friends convinced me that more than ever we need good people to run for public office. Otherwise, we “deserve what we get.” So, I decided to be one of those “good people.”

I believe that all elected officials need to be open to diverse ideas and input from the entire community. I am a good listener and care what my HP neighbors think about issues affecting our city. Increased collaboration with residents may provide better solutions to HP issues. That’s what democracy is about—listening, caring about each other, and collaboration.

I am qualified and ready to immediately start serving the community by working on the policies that are necessary to maintain and improve the condition and future of our city. With an uncertain national agenda, as well as issues at the state level, we must work together to craft intelligent and creative solutions to protect Highland Park now and in the future.

Question 2. Describe the skills, talents and experiences you would contribute to your position

I am a volunteer and good neighbor. My volunteer service includes:

- Housing Commissioner, City of Highland Park
- Board Member, Community Partners for Affordable Housing (CPAH)
- Board Member, Highland Park Volunteer Pool
- Human Services Task Force, City of Highland Park -- Data analysis for the task force
- Co-President, Ravinia Neighbors Association (RNA) -- When the RNA’s President resigned, and others on the Board were not able to serve due to other commitments, I stepped up to be co-President
- College Bound Opportunities (CBO) Mentor for a first-generation college-bound Highland Park High School student
- Neighbor-to-Neighbor Leader
- President, Oakton Community College Chapter of the State University Annuitants Association (SUAA)
- Volunteer for local and national political campaigns

I am a proven leader experienced in management, strategic planning, pension and retiree issues, contract negotiations, and interest-based problem solving.

- Business/management experience in banking and pharmaceutical industries
- Retired from Oakton Community College’s Full-Time Faculty in 2012
 - Chaired the Computer Technologies department containing 4 disciplines, approximately 30 faculty, and offering roughly 130 sections per semester
 - Taught business, management, computer technologies, and college success courses
 - Served as President of the Faculty Association (IEA/NEA) representing 150+ faculty; successfully led faculty through four interest-based contract negotiations; 100% of the faculty joined the association under my leadership
 - Co-chaired Strategic Planning Committee

Education:

- EdD, Adult Education & Community College Management, Northern Illinois University
- MBA, University of Chicago's Booth School of Business
- BS and BSE Mathematics & Secondary Education, Northern Illinois University

Biography:

Eighteen-year resident of Highland Park. Born in Fort Meade, Maryland, where my father was stationed. Married for 43 years with 2 children, 2 grandchildren, and 1 dog.

Question 3. Write a brief job description of your view of this position, including the time commitment required

The Council ensures that HP fulfills its lawful duties, hires the city manager, passes ordinances, and develops/approves budgets for HP. The Council receives input from the city manager, who directs the daily operations of HP, and from city commissions governed by city code and composed of volunteers appointed by the Mayor and approved by the Council.

Councilmen must be team players because they do not have the authority to act on their own. Since decisions are made by the entire Council, it is very important that Councilmen attend meetings and be active participants. The Council meets twice a month. Councilmen need to spend time doing their "homework" reading packets and so on to be prepared for meetings. As liaison to commissions, councilmen must also attend commission meetings as well as other city-related meetings and activities that may occur several times a week.

Councilman is theoretically a part-time job, but in practice Councilmen are always on the job in our city, whether it is at a restaurant, at the grocery store, at the library, having coffee or tea in the community, or enjoying Sunset Park or the beaches. I expect to spend more than 20 hours a week on Council-related issues. Some weeks may require significantly more time than that. As a leader, I have always been accessible and want to be approached by residents who want to discuss a problem or share their opinion. I expect to receive numerous emails and phone calls. All of this takes time. As a retiree and empty-nester, I can devote the hours necessary without conflict. I have no other job or children at home that would interfere with attending meetings several evenings a week, talking to residents, or participating in other events/activities.

Councilmen should be free from business conflicts that may affect their judgment, transparent and creative problem solvers, willing to seek the input of the community regarding issues, and open to exploring all options before reaching a decision. I am able to do all of those.

Question 4. What do you feel are the most important issues facing the City and how would you address those issues?

Core priorities articulated by City Council are fiscal stability, public safety, infrastructure, and community vibrancy. I believe important issues to address relate to these priorities.

Fiscal Stability/tax issues include: uncertainty from Federal/State governments; unfunded mandates; trend to greater local support; pressure for government consolidation to reduce taxes; increase in part-time employees; pension costs; and empty storefronts.

Public safety issues include: new fire station needed in Ravinia to replace 87-year old station that no longer serves the needs of the community; traffic (particularly around schools); and drug/alcohol abuse.

Infrastructure issues include: transportation; maintaining landscape, equipment, facilities, water, and streets/sidewalks; increasing walking/cycling options; greater sustainability efforts; not enough convenient parking in business districts; and inconsistent cell service.

Community vibrancy issues include: preserving community character and history; need for greater transparency and diverse community involvement; campaign costs discouraging potential candidates; planning for changing demographics; aging population creating demand for more housing, transportation, and services; accessibility, housing, jobs, and services for people with mental illness, physical, developmental, and intellectual disabilities; need for additional affordable housing; and immigrant and language issues including sign language to increase accessibility to city events and services.

We need to set both short-term and long-term priorities. There are things we MUST do as a municipality (such as paying our pensions and fixing our potholes) and things that would be nice to do (such as more bike trails). We need to actively seek grants to supplement tax income. We also need to examine how consolidation of local governments might save tax dollars without reducing services. The city has been hiring more part-time employees and reducing the number of full-time employees. While this is a business strategy used to reduce costs, we need to ask ourselves if this is the direction we want to go as a city.

The solution to empty storefronts needs to focus on creating a favorable business climate, attracting jobs, and increasing customers. Internet shopping has continued to grow since 2000 and will continue to do so in the future, so we need to determine what types of retail are better suited to storefronts and encourage growth in those type of businesses. The emphasis needs to be on non-service businesses, since service businesses (e.g., nail salons and dry cleaners) do NOT generate sales tax revenue. I would suggest that we have focus groups of Highland Park residents “brainstorm” the types of businesses that might be successful and then reach out to those businesses.

We need to examine each of the business districts to ensure that the local needs are met. For example, Ravinia residents have been clamoring for a small grocery store since the grocery store closed approximately 19 years ago. Perhaps Sunset could have a satellite store in Ravinia in which there could be a small eating area as well as the sale of pre-made items. The outlet stores along Skokie Highway in Northbrook always seem busy. We should consider recruiting outlets to rent the space formerly used by Saks. Indoor playgrounds are also popular and a definite draw for families. Converting Saks into an indoor playground that charges a user fee might also be a good use of that space. Restaurants are always a draw, and we could create an area with picnic tables, maybe in Port Clinton Square or Renaissance, so that diners could carry out food from local restaurants and eat outside. In the summer, we could have entertainment as a draw. We could encourage local businesses to work together to provide prizes for people who spend a certain amount in a business district. I also see people walking their dogs through town, yet they can't bring their pets into restaurants or coffee shops. Walk-up windows at some establishments that serve drinks and snack food would be welcome. Cyclists along Green Bay often stop at coffee shops to refresh themselves. We should recruit other businesses that serve the needs of cyclists.

HP commercial properties are owned and managed by very few people. The lack of competition keeps rents high in the business districts. We need to develop incentives for owners to keep their stores occupied. One idea would be to provide tax relief for owners who keep their retail stores occupied and generating sales tax revenue.

We should consider moving more HP city offices to the downtown area. While conducting business with the city, people will also shop. We also need to better educate people about parking options in the city and allow three-hour parking on streets so that diners also have time to shop. Some business owners have suggested the possibility of valet parking and might be willing to pay for it.

HP has a duty to protect its residents, and much of this duty is accomplished by first responders such as police, fire and ambulance. We need to continue to ensure that our first responders are well-equipped with smart technology and trained to locate, mitigate, and prevent safety issues. We must continue to support our public safety staff and continue to look for and expand ways to do so in a cost-effective way by partnering with sister governmental bodies and other nearby municipalities.

Traffic is an issue in certain parts of HP. Prior to any school closings and moving children to other schools, we need to study the impact of traffic and how best to mitigate the problems created.

Drug and alcohol abuse is rampant in our country, and we are not immune in HP. We have a federally-licensed and regulated opioid treatment program located in HP to help fight opioid and prescription medication dependence as well as addiction to other drugs and alcohol. Additional resources may become necessary as we, like other communities, continue to deal with this problem.

Cell service problems occur throughout the city. There are too many “dead” zones, posing a public safety and community concern. We need to work with the cellphone providers to improve the networks throughout the city.

As of 2014, there were approximately 30 city-owned properties. More recently the city has purchased properties for future use. The City needs to examine its property portfolio on a regular basis to determine whether it makes sense for the community to continue to own and maintain the properties.

HP residents greatly value their history, and historic preservation has become a “hot” topic. We need to study how other communities deal with historic structures and artifacts for possible ways to maintain our history without overly burdening our residents. We should convene a citizens task force to identify the issues and recommend win-win solutions. New construction, particularly in the downtown area, has created some consternation among residents. For example, many people I have spoken to during this campaign have complained about the new building on Central west of Green Bay. The city and plan commission need to do a better job working with developers so that new buildings better “fit in” with the current character of HP.

Our community like many others is “graying,” and residents want to age in place. We need greater accessibility, housing, jobs, and services for people with mental illness, physical, developmental, and intellectual disabilities. I would suggest that we look at more public-private partnerships and work with local not-for-profits to explore possible solutions to provide more to meet the needs of all residents.

Question 5: How would you reach out and engage all members of the community

Engaging the community is critical to transparency of local government and one of the things that made me so successful as Faculty President and Faculty Development Coordinator at Oakton Community College. To trust local government, citizens need to be involved in decision-making as well as understand how decisions are made. They need to know that their voice is heard and that they, as individuals, can make a difference.

I believe that there is no one “right way” to engage people and encourage participation in activities. Each person has his or her own preferred way to learn and communicate. As such, an effective engagement strategy needs to be multi-dimensional. It is important to try a variety of ways to reach the community and make communication a two-way street.

The following are SOME ways to reach out and engage the community.

- Use both e-mail and “snail” mail, post on social media, and keep the city website up-to-date
- Link the city website to neighborhood organizations (e.g., Ravinia Neighbors Association), business groups, places of worship, schools, sister governments, senior organizations, and condominium associations
- Go door-to-door asking for input and involvement
- Actively seek out and invite citizens to participate using neighborhood organizations, businesses, places of worship, schools, sister governments, senior and other community organizations
- Have a meet the staff day with workshops about what the various departments do and services offered to residents
- Lead workshops on commission issues such as affordable housing and sustainability
- Create a citizens academy to teach residents about city services and opportunities for volunteerism
- Be active participants in community events and have tables at school and park events
- Have a community outreach team and reach out to people where they live and work, and make city staff and elected officials available to attend block parties
- Sponsor (with our sister governmental organizations) an HP day-of-service with projects for residents of all ages and abilities to do things such as assist their neighbors, plant trees in parks, and clean beaches and ravines
- Help staff develop language skills to communicate with all residents
- Host community meetings, town halls, and social events and make greater use of local cable access

Community meetings and many of the above activities can be powerful forums for sharing ideas, airing concerns and engaging new people. But unless people have a compelling personal reason to do so, many will not attend a public meeting. We will need to create strategies for increasing attendance. Some ideas include:

- Involve a local public figure to host the meeting and/or invite local and state elected officials and provide an opportunity for them to share their comments and address participants
- Incorporate an arts event, such as a performance by a school group
- Solicit donated prizes, snacks or desserts from local businesses and have a drawing for attendees.
- Invite new people (some people won’t just volunteer—they need to be asked) to participate in commissions

Thank you for taking the time to read and think about my ideas. I’d love to talk to you further, and I hope to hear from you soon. You can reach me at 847-606-5313, FriendsOfLauraSaret@gmail.com. Also, please visit my website LauraSaret.com to learn more about me and how you can help. Make your voice heard—VOTE!