

Street Collective 2023 Des Moines City Council Candidate Survey

CANDIDATE INFORMATION

Name	Jason Benell (JB)	Joe Gatto (JG)
Pronouns	He/Him	N/A
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Walkability

The current budget plan calls for 180 miles of existing sidewalk gaps to be filled in by the year 2040. Is this an appropriate timeline to provide safe options for pedestrians on priority streets? If not, what ideas do you have to complete them sooner?

Jason Benell (JB): I would always like to see projects that increase walkability have time lines that are less than 20 years out. Changing existing plans would involve likely changing, replacing, or delaying traffic plans to focus on walkability if this were to happen. The details of such a change are too much to list here, but I am absolutely open to changing priorities to make the city more walker much more quickly.

Joe Gatto (JG): No, It is not appropriate timeline. Since I've been on the council (2014), I was one of the first to talk about additional sidewalks. It started with Bill Goode from DMPS about Priority 1 around schools. I'm happy to commit more dollars to that and major trail projects. One way is to partner with the county

To create a more walkable community, it helps to have denser development in neighborhoods and along major streets. Do you support encouraging removal of car-based infrastructure such as surface parking lots and instead promoting more mixed-use and multi-family developments in the city?

(JB): Absolutely. The future of any city in the US, but especially in the midwest is going to be dependent on its walkability and function that is NOT car-centric. With the changing climate and move away from fossil fuels it is imperative that cities adopt a more walk and bike focused transportation network NOW so that we are not looking at crises for residents in 40, 30, or even 10 years from today.

(JG): Yes, I've done that and was very supportive in the East Village of that type of project similar to the A.C. Marriot

Biking

The Street Collective's mission states that all residents deserve active transportation options such as walking and biking that are accessible, safe, and enjoyable. Where in your ward do you see major gaps in this network and how do you propose to fix these gaps?

(JB): Ward 4 has some excellent additions to the bike network, but where it falters is its connectivity to the rest of the city infrastructure, particularly in the western edge of the ward nearest 9th and east to southward. Much of the existing infrastructure is hostile to bikes as they are poorly maintained sidewalks that tend to be right alongside major motorways with no protection for bikes. I would like to see a path from the East side of the Ward through to the West to connect to the bike network with dedicated lines away from unobservant traffic, perhaps paralleling Army Post as well as McKinley.

(JG): No connectivity to the Gay Lea Wilson Trail. We are using ARPA funding and partnering with the Polk County Supervisors for a sidewalk / trail connection along Scott Ave. The work should start next year!

Do you support adding physical separators such as bollards, planters, and curbs between street lanes and buffered bike lanes (paint only) to improve safety for bicyclists?

(JB): Yes, bike lanes are more effective and safe when protected and will also see more use when the public perception is that they are made to be safer.

(JG): I would support all of the above if it makes sense and the majority of the property owners are for it! I would use the East Village as example. I was supportive of it as a pilot program, but when the majority of business owners and residents didn't like it, we worked through it together to find a solution that worked for all of us.

Transportation Safety

Do you support redesigning Des Moines' most dangerous roadways if this means eliminating some travel lanes and parking spaces for cars? For example, do you support the rightsizing of Euclid Avenue, Douglas Avenue, and similar future similar projects?

(JB): Yes, increasing safety should take priority over expansion of car centric infrastructure.

(JG): Yes, I would look at S.W. 9th as roadway that needs redesigned and would like to see what the study says and present that to residents for their input.

Do you support expanding speed and red-light camera enforcement to high-crash streets across Des Moines?

(JB): I am unsure if these methods are the best tools to curb crashes in intersections, particularly speed cameras, when used alone or as a cure-all. Red light cameras do have data showing they are effective in reducing crashes, though often the signage and notification does more than the cameras themselves as environmental signals work better than after-the-fact enforcement mechanisms. Speed cameras are often manipulated for revenue when the goal should be changing the environment to slow speeds rather than penalize a speeder after the fact if actual immediate safety is the goal. I wouldn't be comfortable expanding them without more data.

(JG): Yes, it's our only tool in our toolbox to help with speeding that seems effective. The neighbors want it and so do I.

Public Transit

DART's costs have increased, and it may not be able to continue its current level of services without increased funding. Do you support increasing funding from the City of Des Moines to DART to maintain its current level of service?

(JB): Yes.

(JG): We need to look at all options and partners. We also need to think out of the box of how we provide public transportation to tall. I would like to see more ON Demand transportation.

What is your vision for how Des Moines can play a role in a regional public transportation network in the Metro?

(JB): Des Moines should be a leader in this as a central hub for the state of Iowa. Much of the surrounding areas require a car to work or get to school. Des Moines should be a place where that is not required, with walkable neighborhoods, bikes being a more common method of travel, and a well funded and maintained bus AND light rail system in place. Des Moines is well situated with its neighboring suburbs to create these networks across all of the metro.

(JG): As a member of the Executive Committee of the MPO and former Chair, I believe DM needs to lead and others have followed in regional transportation. Understanding the needs of the region and having the relationship with other elected officials outside of DM will help with the vision of the region and help us all prioritize our dollars effectively.

Funding

Electric bicycles are an inclusive, inexpensive, and low-carbon way to get around. Denver offers a \$300 general rebate and a \$1,200 income-qualified rebate for e-bikes purchased from local bike shops. Is this something we should explore in Des Moines?

(JB): Absolutely.

(JG): Happy to look at it. I'm not sure in our budget where those dollars would come from, but happy to explore it with my colleagues.

Spending decisions require choices and tradeoffs, especially in light of higher interest rates on municipal bonds. The city has focused almost exclusively on car travel and an extensive street and highway network for about 75 years. What kind of transportation projects should the city do less of? What should it do more of?

(JB): Des Moines should do less free way expansion and “one-more-lane”ism and instead focus on pulling vehicles off the roads by investing in alternative transportation methods. Des Moines is well suited for a light rail network using existing infrastructure. We should also continue to expand and upgrade our existing bike network. This will become a major method of transportation as vehicles become more and more expensive to operate and maintain.

(JG): When I was first elected, I worked with DMPS and Bill Goode to identify priority one sidewalk gaps around schools. I was on the original committee of MoveDSM. We need to make DM assessable for everyone and all forms of transportation safely. My record has proven I’m willing to make those tradeoffs for my constituents.

Personal Travel Habits

How often do you ride a bicycle for transportation in the city?

(JB): Weekly

(JG): Monthly

How often do you ride public transportation in the city?

(JB): Yearly

(JG): Never

How often do you drive a car in the city?

(JB): Daily

(JG): Daily

For city meetings open to the public such as city council meetings, and especially those that do not offer a virtual option, will you support requiring these meetings to be held in facilities served by public transit service?

(JB): Yes

(JG): Yes

How do you typically commute to work? Describe your experience traveling in Des Moines and what you would do to improve it.

(JB): I work from home and have since the COVID-19 pandemic. When I DID work in an office, I did bike to work twice a week until my children become school aged and that wasn't possible. I think Des Moines has a great opportunity to expand its non car methods of transportation without alienating or taking away from existing infrastructure. The biggest improvement would be the sustainability aspect of transportation, both private and public. Transport in the city since the ways it has been done for the past 50 years just won't be tenable in the next 50 and we should plan for that now.

(JG): Typically, I drive because I have two jobs and I'm not always in the same place for my job. I have walked and rode my bike very rarely.