

Aspire North REALTORS 2025 Traverse City Candidate Questionnaire

Full Name: Laura Ness

Office Running For: City Commission

Current position/occupation:

Professionally, I served in multiple executive roles in the healthcare industry, including as a Vice President of Planning and Business Development. Currently, I am the President and Co-Founder of Preserve Hickory, a non-profit established to benefit the City-owned Park Hickory Hills.

List previous campaigns, elected office, boards, commissions, etc:

- City of Traverse City and Charter Township of Garfield Recreational Authority, current Chair.
- City of Traverse City, Hickory Hills Advisory Committee, current Chair.
- Great Lakes Sports Commission, current Board Member & Grant Committee Chair.
- The Botanic Garden at Historic Barns Park, Capital Campaign Committee.
- Yes! For City Parks (2015 inaugural ballot initiative for the Brown Bridge Trust Parks Improvement Fund), Treasurer.
- Citizens for Students (2007 TCAPS Millage Renewal Campaign), Co-Chair.
- Grand Traverse Ski Club, Past President and Hall of Fame Inductee.

Why are you running for office?

I'm proud to call Traverse City home. It's where I've raised my family and dedicated over 25 years to volunteer service—supporting our schools, parks, nonprofits, and local government. Our City Commission needs thoughtful leadership that protects what makes this place special while addressing pressing challenges like housing affordability, infrastructure investment, and the preservation of our community's charm and character. I'm running because I believe my common-sense approach, proven ability to collaborate, and track record of turning ideas into action will help move Traverse City forward thoughtfully and effectively.

Briefly describe your campaign strategy: I am running a comprehensive and strategic campaign with the foundation being: a lot of listening. I've already met with nearly 40 local leaders and city residents. I've also scheduled home gatherings in several neighborhoods, creating opportunities for deeper dialogue and relationship-building. In addition, I am actively fundraising to reach more voters with my message through outreach, door knocking, mailers, yard signs, a digital presence, and more. You can learn more about my campaign at: lauranessfortc.com.

Why do you think you will win?

I have earned the trust and respect of residents across the community through more than 25 years of long-standing involvement in local organizations and initiatives. People know that I listen, lead with integrity, and deliver results—and they know I'll be a commissioner who is deeply rooted in the community and committed to tackling the challenging issues we face.

How many votes do you need to win?

Based on my analysis of the results of the 2023 City Commission race, I estimate that I will need over 2200 votes to win the election.

Are REALTORS actively helping with your campaign?

I've met with several local realtors on the campaign trail to gain their input on key issues related to housing and zoning. I also have the trust and respect of many realtors in the community through my many years of active civic engagement and volunteer service.

Traverse City goes through an annual budgeting process. What do you think the budget priorities should be?

Approving the annual budget is one of the most important responsibilities of the City Commission. The annual budget should be guided by the values and priorities of city residents, fiscal responsibility to City taxpayers, and the long-term goals outlined in the City's Strategic Action Plan. My top budget priorities include:

- **Public safety and essential services** – Ensuring our police and fire departments are well-staffed and equipped to serve a growing and changing community.
- **Infrastructure investment** – Maintaining and improving streets; sidewalks; water, sewer, and stormwater systems; parks; and other public spaces to ensure safety, reliability, mobility, accessibility, and sustainability.
- **Affordable and workforce housing** – Supporting projects and partnerships that expand housing options.
- **Environmental stewardship** – Funding initiatives that protect our natural resources.
- **Civic engagement** – Investing in tools for increased transparency and communications.

The shortage of housing inventory is a big topic among our membership and the community at large across our area. Does local government have a role to play in this realm? If so, what do you think a local government can do to address housing supply concerns?

Yes—local government has a critical role to play in addressing regional housing challenges like ours. While the City of Traverse City can't solve this alone, we can help lead.

Traverse City faces real constraints: rising costs and limited land. That puts pressure on young families, workers, and longtime residents—and risks eroding the diverse, vibrant community that makes this place special.

I support more housing options, both in the city and across the region. That means updating our policies to allow for more smart, sustainable housing options—especially near jobs, schools, and services. It also means aligning our zoning, planning, and budget with real housing goals, and working in partnership—not in silos—with surrounding townships, nonprofits, realtors, developers, and the state.

What sets me apart is experience. I've helped lead complex projects across jurisdictions, built public-private partnerships like those at Hickory Hills and through the Joint Rec Authority, and understand the systems we need to align to get results. As commissioner, I'll continue to push for practical, forward-looking solutions to help more people make Traverse City their home.

Land use continues to be a highly debated issue, including those elements centered around planning and zoning. Are there specific policies or zoning restrictions that you support or oppose?

I support zoning policies that reflect the scale and character of Traverse City and respond to real challenges like housing access and smart, managed growth.

One opportunity we can't ignore is making better use of our underutilized main corridors—areas that already have the infrastructure in place. But our current zoning limits the kind of housing and mixed-use development that could support more residents, reduce sprawl, and strengthen our economy. By updating those policies, we can create more opportunities for people to live near where they work and shop—without changing the feel of our existing neighborhoods.

I also believe zoning needs to be consistent and fair. That means following our own rules, updating them when they no longer serve us, and aligning land use with the City's Master Plan and Strategic Action Plan—both shaped by strong community input. As commissioner, I'll support policies that are thoughtful, transparent, and truly serve the people who live here.

Should local governments use zoning to prohibit the rental of residential property on a short-term basis?

Yes—local governments absolutely have a role in regulating—and when needed, limiting—short-term rentals through zoning and other tools. But I don't support blanket, one-size-fits-all restrictions.

As a City Commissioner, I'd approach this issue the same way I approach any complex policy challenge: by listening to the community, reviewing objective data, and working collaboratively with all stakeholders. With that approach, we can craft balanced, thoughtful, reasonable policies that protect neighborhood character, support long-term housing affordability, and respect property owners' rights.

Tax Increment Financing (TIF) has been described as a regional taxation tool used by the Traverse City Downtown Development Association (DDA) to fund infrastructure repairs and improvements required by intense regional use of our downtown core. Do you support TIF-97? If not, who should pay for those required costs/repairs?

A strong, vibrant downtown is important to our whole region: it helps drive our local economy, create jobs, support small businesses, and enhance property values city-wide. TIF can be an important tool that helps fund public infrastructure—not just downtown, but across the city. In Traverse City, TIF has supported essential improvements in downtown, along key corridors, through Brownfield redevelopment, and now, with the state's new housing TIF, can help unlock workforce housing projects as well. These tools allow us to meet infrastructure needs without placing the full burden on City taxpayers.

Following the 2024 ballot initiative, any creation, amendment, or extension of any TIF plan now requires voter approval. As a City Commissioner, I will work collaboratively with the DDA and other partners to ensure that future TIF proposals are guided by public input, aligned with the City's Master Plan and Strategic Action Plan, and designed to deliver clear value to residents across the city and region. With the right approach, we can ensure that TIF remains a viable option for sharing regional costs not only to support downtown's continued success but also improvements across the City.

How and on what issues would you use Aspire North's input?

Realtors are important professionals to engage with, as they bring deep knowledge of housing, zoning, and the dynamics of Traverse City's evolving economy. I look forward to working with Aspire North and other community stakeholders to review the findings of the recently commissioned short-term rental study. I also welcome the opportunity to collaborate with Aspire North through their involvement in the National Association of REALTORS® Transforming Neighborhoods Program and the CRE Consulting Corps, particularly in developing data-driven recommendations to expand housing options in Traverse City.