

# Middleton Mayoral Candidates Share Priorities Ahead of April 7 Election

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Incumbent Mayor Emily Kuhn and District 6 Alder Lisa Janairo, candidates for City of Middleton mayor, shared their priorities and perspectives in response to Times-Tribune questions ahead of the April 7, 2026, spring election.

**What are your top three priorities if elected mayor, and why are they your top priorities?**

**Emily Kuhn:** My top priorities are housing, jobs, and public safety, and they're connected. We've made real progress on housing, moving from just 10 single-family homes approved per year to over 200, but affordability is still a pressure point for families and seniors. On jobs, keeping 1,800 Thermo Fisher positions here and now, welcoming their \$58 million expansion, shows what's possible when the city is an active partner. And everything else we do rests on public safety, I'll keep investing in our firefighters, EMS, and police, because safe neighborhoods are the foundation on which everything else is built on.

**Lisa Janairo:** My priorities are to help meet our growing city's needs, strengthen our sense of community, and keep people informed about what our city government does and how it affects all of us. These priorities are grounded in my desire for every Middleton resident to be able to live their best life.

• **Meeting Our Needs** — Sustainable, managed growth can preserve what makes Middleton special. As Plan Commission chair, I'll hold developers accountable for protecting green spaces, locate multifamily housing along transit lines, and advocate for safer infrastructure for bikes and pedestrians. As a member of the Workforce Housing Committee, I helped write the city's Housing Action Plan, which calls for investments in afford-

able housing, energy-efficiency grants, and renter protections. I look forward to implementing it as mayor.

- **Strengthening Community** — My grassroots campaign demonstrates that I can bring residents together. What started with a handful of people has grown to a team of 15 volunteers and 160 public endorsements from residents all across Middleton. People are genuinely excited about their city government — a welcome contrast to the hopelessness many feel about the federal government.
- **Keeping People Informed** — An informed community is an empowered community. As alder, I write a monthly newsletter to keep constituents informed about city government, my votes, and how decisions affect daily life. As mayor, I'll expand it city-wide. I'll also hold office hours at convenient times for residents.

**In your view, is the City of Middleton currently on the right track? Why or why not?**

**Emily Kuhn:** I do. We've earned national recognition for our housing work, we're growing good jobs, we opened the Lake Street Lakefront Park, and our School Safety Corridors are making a real difference for kids. But I'm not complacent; affordability, flood preparedness, and making University Avenue more walkable still need sustained attention. The foundation is solid. The work isn't done.

**Lisa Janairo:** Yes. Our highly skilled staff consistently delivers results through innovative approaches and long-term planning — five-year plans covering finance, roads, trails, parks, conservancies, and more. We also have engaged residents who volunteer their time on city committees and at the many service organizations that make Middleton a great place to live. What's miss-



Emily Kuhn

ing is mayoral leadership that complements these two — leadership that celebrates the contributions of others, spends time building community relationships, and prioritizes broader and more diverse resident engagement.

**What is the city government doing particularly well right now?**

**Emily Kuhn:** We have made real progress on housing. The zoning rewrite, the TIF transparency survey, and direct developer outreach have combined to move the needle in a meaningful way for real families. Our public safety coordination is also stronger than it's been, with quarterly cross-department briefings and proactive succession planning. And our environmental investments, the Lake Street lakefront park, the federal stormwater grant, and Conservancy stewardship, reflect a city that genuinely protects what makes Middleton special.

**Lisa Janairo:** A great deal! Our staff administers elections, maintains roads, parks, buildings, and conservancy lands, offers programming for all ages, enforces our municipal code, manages finances and personnel, and ensures regulatory compliance — all for a growing community.

City government attracts attention when something falls short. It's easy to overlook the many things that go right every day. As mayor, one of my priorities will be to recognize and celebrate that exceptional daily work.

**Where does the city government most need to improve?**



Lisa Janairo

**Emily Kuhn:** Internal communication. I've put structures in place, quarterly leadership meetings, recurring developer-city staff calls, but keeping a city this active aligned across departments is ongoing work. I also want to go deeper on flood preparedness. The 2018 floods were a serious wake-up call, and while we've made real progress, I want every neighborhood to benefit from our stormwater improvements, not just those closest to past damage.

**Lisa Janairo:** Communication is the foundation of trust in government. Residents deserve accurate, timely information consistently and in plain language. I appreciate the city's recent progress and am committed to building on it.

My monthly e-newsletter connects Middleton's government to residents' daily lives. Readers tell me it has helped them better understand their city. As mayor, I'll expand it city-wide and strengthen broader communications, including our website and direct outreach to neighborhoods affected by city projects.

**Members of the Common Council don't always agree, but debate is generally respectful. How would you handle disagreement, and how would you work with council members who hold very different views from your own?**

**Emily Kuhn:** I lead with listening. Before I land on a position, I want to understand the reasoning behind a colleague's view, there's usually something valid there. I bring data, I bring residents' voices, and I look for common ground on outcomes even when we disagree on approach. In my federal role, I train thousands of staff in de-escalation and interagency communication, and that same instinct serves me well here. Good debate leads to better decisions. I don't take disagreement personally.

**Lisa Janairo:** I spent my career developing public

policy and working with state legislators on a non-partisan basis, so working with people who hold very different views is familiar ground. I look for common interests and build from there. I don't tolerate disrespect or bullying. When I preside over Council meetings, I'll enforce our code of conduct, which requires members to maintain respect and decorum.

**How should the City of Middleton measure success in economic development? What benchmarks or indicators matter most to you?**

**Emily Kuhn:** Quality jobs that allow people to actually live where they work, that's the core measure. I also watch business vacancy rates, small business openings, and whether our retail and restaurant corridors are genuinely thriving. Housing affordability is an economic indicator too: if workers can't afford to live here, our employers struggle to hire. The Thermo Fisher story, 1,800 jobs retained, now a \$58 million expansion adding 350 more, is the model. That happened because we showed up as a real partner.

**Lisa Janairo:** The city's primary tool for economic development is tax incremental financing within specific areas called Tax Incremental Districts (TIDs). This April, we'll close TID #3, which is one of the state's most successful in terms of the new property value created. TID #3 helped transform Middleton's downtown into the vibrant center it is today, generating hundreds of millions of dollars in new property value that can support city services, infrastructure, and amenities like Stone Horse Green. With TID #3 closing, we'll have the opportunity to establish new TIDs. While employment is an important measure, the most significant indicator of direct benefit to the city is the new property value created within TIDs.

**Growth presents tradeoffs — including housing needs, environmental impact, infrastructure costs, and community character. How should the City of Middleton approach growth over the next decade?**

**Emily Kuhn:** Intentionally and connected to infrastructure investment. Our updated zoning code supports smaller lots, ADUs, and starter homes without sacrificing neighborhood

character, but zoning alone isn't enough. Roads, stormwater systems, and parks have to keep pace, which is why I've pursued federal funding and prioritized capital planning. Every development near our watershed needs a conservation lens built in from the start. University Avenue is a good example of where I want to go, new density near the Madison border paired with a walkable, tree-lined corridor that draws people toward downtown. Growth that serves our community character, not the other way around.

**Lisa Janairo:** State law requires cities to meet forecasted housing needs. As noted above, my preference is to concentrate new multifamily development along major bus routes and preserving existing affordable housing. According to Dane County, 26% of new multifamily housing should be rent-restricted to meet the need. Expanding owner-occupied housing is equally important, and the city may be able to direct a portion of its pending Affordable Housing Fund toward incentivizing condominium development — a housing type many residents have identified as desirable.

**The city has focused in recent years on expanding housing, including affordable housing. Should the City of Middleton continue prioritizing population growth, focus more on quality of life for current residents, or pursue both equally? How would you balance those goals?**

**Emily Kuhn:** Both, and I'd push back on the idea that they're in tension. A city with diverse, affordable housing options is a better city for everyone who already lives here. Our housing survey showed seniors wanting to downsize and young families needing more space. By sharing that data, we helped facilitate natural transitions that actually strengthened established neighborhoods. I moved to Middleton to raise my family because of what this city offers. I want every family to have that same opportunity, and I want the neighbors who built this place to be able to stay in it.

**Lisa Janairo:** We haven't prioritized population growth — it's happening because we have a strong economy, great schools, and wonderful amenities like our exceptional green spaces. Growth and qual-

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We can meet housing demand while maintaining quality of life, shaping our evolution intentionally — expanding green spaces, creating gathering places like Stone Horse Green, and ensuring new residents are welcomed and fully engaged.

When tradeoffs arise, and they will, residents will be part of the conversation, long-term impacts will be weighed alongside short-term needs, and decisions will reflect our shared vision for Middleton's future.

**What specific steps would you take to ensure transparency and public trust in city government?**

**Emily Kuhn:** Transparency has to be proactive, not just compliance with the open meetings law. I authored the first TIF survey of its kind in Wisconsin so residents could see exactly how public dollars performed. I ran a 500-plus response housing survey in a week and personally followed up with residents who left contact information. I share committee work and updates on social media so neighbors who can't attend meetings stay informed. I'll keep publishing clear outcome data and making sure residents have real, accessible ways to engage, not just a public comment period at the end of a process.

**Lisa Janairo:** Transparency and accountability are core values that guide my work. My monthly newsletter helps constituents hold me accountable, and it builds trust by helping residents understand my ap-

proach to policymaking. As mayor, I'll expand it city-wide, and I'll hold regular office hours so I'm accessible to residents.

**What is your position on the use of Flock cameras in the City of Middleton? How should the city balance investigative tools with privacy concerns?**

**Emily Kuhn:** Flock cameras can support public safety, but only with clear policies on data retention, access, and accountability. I've presented statewide on AI adoption in public safety, and I believe any surveillance technology requires community input before deployment, defined limits on use, and regular Council reporting.

On AI broadly, I believe in transparency, human oversight, and equity. Automated tools can introduce bias without regular audits, and decisions affecting residents should always have a human in the loop. Effective tools with ethical guardrails, that's the standard I'd hold Middleton to.

**Lisa Janairo:** I have a record of supporting our public safety officers. However, I don't support the use of Flock cameras for three reasons:

- **Accountability** — The Flock contract bypassed the Finance and Personnel Committee and Council, bundled into a broader IT request. As mayor, I'll ask Council to enact an ordinance, modeled on Madison's, requiring approval before any equipment is deployed for the purpose of surveillance.
- **Data Security** — The contract permits our data to be used outside Middleton without explicit permission. The

cameras' low cost suggests data collection, not hardware, is Flock's core business.

- **Privacy** — I respect our Police Department and recognize the cameras have helped solve some crimes. That said, I strongly favor privacy protections. The ordinance I propose would ensure future decisions on surveillance equipment are made transparently, with Council deliberation and clear limits on data use.

**Some residents have expressed concern about ICE enforcement activity in the community. What role, if any, should the city play in addressing those concerns while maintaining public safety and complying with state and federal law?**

**Emily Kuhn:** Every resident in Middleton deserves to feel safe, at home, walking their kids to school, and when interacting with the local government. Our local police have a distinct role from federal immigration enforcement, and I believe in being clear with all residents about how our public safety agencies operate. Building trust between our police and every community member makes everyone safer, that's a public safety principle, not a political one. I'll work with our Police Chief and city legal counsel to make sure our policies are lawful, transparent, and clearly communicated.

**Lisa Janairo:** Residents' concerns are real and deserve to be taken seriously. The city's role is to keep everyone safe, whether they live, work, or visit here, while operating in accordance with state and federal law.

- **Preparation and Plan-**

**ning** — I have requested that the Police Department conduct a tabletop exercise to walk staff and Council through a scenario: After receiving confirmation that ICE is in Middleton, what are the next 10 things that need to happen? How will information be shared internally? How will we keep the public informed? Preparation clarifies roles before a situation arises, not during it.

- **Supporting Businesses and Service Organizations** — I restored the Police Department's requested training officer position to the city's 2026 budget after the incumbent cut it. One responsibility of the training officer is to help local employers and organizations learn how to keep their people safe in a variety of situations, including if ICE shows up.
- **Community Safety During Enforcement** — Our Police Department's role is to maintain public safety and protect all residents, including those who gather to observe or express concern. Clear protocols established in advance ensure a calm, consistent response that protects our people while maintaining their trust.

Middleton is a welcoming community. As mayor, I'll work to ensure everyone who lives, works, or worships here feels safe and supported.

**What is the biggest threat to the City of Middleton's quality of life?**

**Emily Kuhn:** Housing affordability. If families, essential workers, and seniors on fixed incomes can't afford to live here, we lose the diversity and community

spirit that make Middleton worth protecting. Flood risk is closely connected, extreme weather events can devastate neighborhoods and set families back financially. Both threats require sustained, proactive investment. That's been the work of my first term, and it remains the work ahead.

**Lisa Janairo:** Public safety is the foundation of quality of life. Right now, the safety of people traveling on foot, bike, or personal mobility device is my most pressing concern. The tragic death of a school-bound teenager in Madison is a sobering reminder of what's at stake. Every child should be able to walk or bike to school safely. As mayor, I'll advocate for:

- **Complete Streets** — Designing road projects for pedestrians and cyclists in addition to cars.
- **Traffic Enforcement** — Addressing speeding, failure to yield, and red-light running.
- **Transit-Oriented Development** — Expanding housing and bus service along transit routes to give more residents a real alternative to driving, reducing traffic volume and improving safety for everyone.

**What is your favorite thing about the City of Middleton, and how would you protect or enhance it as mayor?**

**Emily Kuhn:** The people. Middleton is genuinely the Good Neighbor City; neighbors look out for each other, volunteers show up, and residents are engaged. I saw it as PTO Treasurer at Sauk Trail, as a Sunday School teacher, at arts events, and on the north loop of the Conservancy with my family. As Mayor, I protect that

by keeping housing accessible, investing in safe streets and parks, and leading with the same commitment that brought my family here, making Middleton a place where everyone can feel safe and belong.

**Lisa Janairo:** My favorite thing about Middleton is our conservancy lands — especially Pheasant Branch Conservancy, the crown jewel of our public lands. These lands advance community well-being, ecological health, and fiscal responsibility, delivering natural infrastructure that engineered systems alone cannot replicate.

As mayor, I'll build on my record:

- **Complete the Graber Greenway Project** — working with city staff, the Water Resources Management Commission, and the Friends of Pheasant Branch Conservancy to expand stormwater management, improve water quality, and protect habitat.
- **Grow our Conservancy Lands** — pursuing acquisitions, as I did in 2025 by helping staff acquire 14 acres of conservancy lands in District 6 at no cost to taxpayers.
- **Invest in Dedicated Staffing** — ensuring the Conservancy Lands Technician position I fought to restore to the 2026 budget is filled and fully supported.
- **Strengthen Cooperative Management** — convening city staff, Dane County, and the Friends to turn shared goals into formal commitments.

Middleton has nearly 800 acres of conservancy land. With the right leadership, we can protect and enhance that legacy for generations to come.