

## **General Information**

**Candidate Name:** Armen Melkonians

**Email Address:** [armen@votearmen.com](mailto:armen@votearmen.com)

**Phone Number:** 310-247-0834

**Candidate's Current Occupation:** Civil and Environmental Engineer

**Candidate's Employer:** Self Employed – Engineering Consultant

**Campaign Contact Person (if other than candidate):** N/A

**What qualifications do you bring to this office?:**

Self Employed Engineer designing real solutions for our built environment for the last 30 years – Resident advocate and team builder.

**Why are you running?**

My wife, my four-year-old, and I live and experience the day-to-day concerns that you do living in Santa Monica. That is my “Why?”

**What are the top issues of your campaign?**

- 1) Reduction of crime and increased Public Safety
- 2) Reduction of crime and increased Public Safety
- 3) Reduction of crime and increased Public Safety
- 4) Reimagining Homeless Services to make a difference in Santa Monica's Parks and Streets
- 5) Revitalize our Downtown Santa Monica
- 6) Ensure that our Public Infrastructure can accommodate planned development.

**How do you plan to address those issues once elected?**

Crime and Public Safety are paramount and need to be addressed immediately and on day one. I would want to see Crime and Public Safety as a standing number one issue on the agenda at each City Council meeting as part of the City Managers Report to City Council until the crime statistics are reduced and remain reduced for at least twelve consecutive months.

I would encourage the City Council to work with the city attorney, the city manager, our Police and Fire Departments, the Community Development Department, Building and Safety, Public Works, Sanitation, and our Homeless Service providers to set up realistic milestones and goals and track results with transparency and demand accountability.

Include all stakeholders including our city's residents, business owners, property owners, and city staff, in the entire process.

**List all of your individual and/or organizational endorsements:**

Pending

**How long have you lived in Santa Monica?**

12 years

**Where else have you lived, and why did you live there?**

West Side / Los Angeles; I received my B.S. in Civil and Environmental Engineering from UCLA in 1993 and lived on the westside since college.

**Will you pledge to serve on City Council for your entire four-year term?**

Yes; This is actually a required pledge when submitting nomination papers for any elected position to the City Clerk's office.

**Party / Activism**

**How long have you been a registered Democrat?**

33 years (since I was 18 years old)

**Have you ever been registered as a member of another political party, or as Decline To State? If so, which party and why?:**

NO

**What is your experience with political activism?**

Ran for office of Office of City Council in Santa Monica in 2016 – received 12,603 votes and came in 5<sup>th</sup> place behind 4 incumbents with 4 seats up for election

Residocracy, Founder - a community grassroots organization

**Have you ever volunteered or worked for a political campaign other than your own, and if so, in what capacity were you involved?**

Yes – I wrote the referendum initiative for the Hines Development Agreement and then working with the community of residents in Santa Monica, we circulated the petition and were able to get 13,440 signatures to overturn the city council's approval of the development project which would have otherwise added 17,000 daily car trips to Santa Monica.

**Which political candidates have you endorsed or supported publicly in the past? Please list as many as possible.**

Oscar de la Torre, Phil Brock, Christine Parra, Lana Negrete, Gleam Davis, Terry O'Day, Ben Allen, Supreme Court Judge David Berger, Ted Lieu, Gavin Newsom, Bernie Sanders.

**Have you ever signed for or publicly supported efforts to recall a public official from office?**

NO – I think recalls should be reserved for extreme circumstances – we have elections every 4 years.

If so, please list the name(s) of the officials and why you felt they should be recalled.

N/A

Please list any organizations with which you are a member, including any leadership position you have held in each organization.

Wilshire Montana Neighborhood Coalition – Board Member

Residocracy, founder

Please confirm that you have read the latest version of the California Democratic Party Platform, as found here: <https://cadem.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/CDP-Platform-2022-FINAL-1-1.pdf> List any items in the CDP Platform with which you disagree. (This is in no way a litmus test for our endorsement; however, because the party delegates have worked so hard on every word of this platform document, we believe it will be a helpful guide to comprehend the policy differences between each candidate.)

Yes – no exceptions

## **Campaign Finance**

Please indicate Yes or No to the following statements:

**1. I pledge not to take contributions from oil, gas, and coal industry executives, lobbyists, and PACs:**

YES

**2. I pledge not to take contributions from police or law enforcement unions, lobbyists, and PACs.**

NO – This is a ridiculous and out of touch question in Santa Monica.

**3. I pledge not to take contributions from development firms, lobbyists, and PACs.**

YES

**If you answered No to any of the above contribution questions, please explain here:**

The Santa Monica Police are our friends not our enemies. They provide excellent outstanding service especially in these challenging times. We should be praising them for their service to our communities not condemning them. They are capable of (and they do) their jobs constitutionally. We need more police, not less police. Also see my answers in the Public Safety section below.

I take offense as a Democrat, as a resident of Santa Monica, and as a City Council Candidate to the question by the Democratic Club for council candidates to pledge not to take a contribution from the law enforcement officers, their unions, lobbyists, and PACs. Shame on the Democratic Club for this Question.

## **City Governance**

### **What is your brief assessment of how City Council has functioned over the past two years?**

With the three Change Slate council members unseating three incumbents in the 2020 election, the current city council has become more responsive to resident needs. This is a great thing. They have managed a transition from a very challenging time. I believe that the current council needs additional resident centric support on the dias.

### **Do you believe we should keep the current system of seven at-large council seats?**

NO.

### **What other type of representation would you be interested in exploring?**

Districts with district representatives. I support district boundaries being drawn through a robust community engagement process with a focus on fair elections and an inclusive democracy.

The LA County Democratic Party and the State Democratic Party have passed resolutions in favor of district elections and against at large elections for cities. I am a democrat and I support the democratic party's position.

### **Do you support the elimination of the City Manager position and/or the creation of an empowered, directly elected Mayor of Santa Monica?**

I'm interested in looking at the best practices for the size of our city and I could support a strong mayor form of governance together with the Districts, but I would need further study and community engagement in the process.

### **Do you favor any changes to our City Charter as a means to make the city government more democratic?**

Yes, Institute districts elections.

### **Are top city staffers' salaries too high, and is this a potential source for balancing the City budget?**

The City budget is balanced and required to be so. As we found during the pandemic, we need to remain competitive in our city employee salaries to attract the best. We must also have accountability standards to ensure that we are getting and maintaining the best so that our dollars go a long way. We should not expect to balance our budget on the backs of our employees. We should revitalize our economy and reimagine our 3<sup>rd</sup> Street Promenade to increase revenues.

### **Should each City Council member have their own paid staffer, and/or should Council be a full time job?**

YES on both.

## **Justice, Equity, Diversity & Inclusion**

### **In what ways can the City of Santa Monica ensure that, in a real, practical sense, Black Lives Matter in our community?**

We can Ensure that our budget, our hiring practices, our legal positions, and our grantees reflect the diversity of our city and ensure that black voices and residents are represented within all of these.

**In what ways can the City of Santa Monica better protect its undocumented residents?**

Ensure language justice. Translate notices and city information to non-English speaking people. Ensure a position that law enforcement does not co-operate with ICE. Provide inclusive policies through our economic recovery, so that the street vendors experience opportunities to be a part of the city's future economic recovery.

**How do you plan to (in the moment) counteract any and all observed possible acts of microaggressions towards Women, African Americans, Hispanics, LGBTQ and others of marginalized communities from your fellow Councilmembers or members of the public?**

To ensure that there is training at all levels of the City organization, from the top down. To ensure that council members and city staff understand what micro-aggressions are; for example, even the use of the word Hispanic can be considered by some as a micro-aggression. Cultural sensitivity training from a top-down approach needs to be implemented. I would make the training a condition of funding for all future grantees.

**What is your experience in dealing with these situations?**

I developed an organization that worked to expand civic engagement for all people in the city. I learned a lot from that. There are deficiencies in our society, including our government, which I have seen and know they exist. I would want to work on addressing these deficiencies quickly, so they do not remain unaddressed and continue to cause damage to the victims of the micro-aggressions.

**What are the most significant environmental justice issues in Santa Monica, and how will you address them?**

Most of the environmental justice issues are located in and adjacent to the Pico Neighborhood. For example, methane at Gandara Park, hazardous waste facilities in the city's maintenance yard, airport pollution from the Santa Monica Airport, automobile emissions adjacent to the 10 freeway.

I would support the work of the new City Council, where for the first time ever it recognized that environmental justice was a key component of sustainability and the environment when it adopted an ordinance to convert the Task Force on the Environment to the permanent Commission on Sustainability, Environmental Justice, and the Environment.

I would organize study sessions on the most important environmental justice issues facing our communities, as outlined above.

**What specific initiatives to increase diversity and promote inclusion among City staff are you interested in pursuing, and how will you work with the City Manager to implement these policies?**

I would ensure that we have an annual diversity report to assess hiring, firing, retention and promotion practices of city staff over time. The report should be transparent, available to the public, and presented to the City Council in a public hearing. We should place particular focus on historically marginalized groups within our organization to ensure they are protected.

## **Housing / Development**

### **What steps would you propose to address the homelessness crisis in the City of Santa Monica?**

The homelessness crisis in the city of Santa Monica is driven by a transient population with predominantly out of state origins, that is accessing Santa Monica from both the City and County of Los Angeles. There are extremely few, if any, previously housed Santa Monica residents in this population. Moreover, this homeless population is disproportionately impacted by substance abuse and mental illness.

Santa Monica cannot solve such a regional and national issue on its own. Attempts to do so without disincentivizing the desire to transit through, and remain, in Santa Monica will only lead to a stagnant or deteriorating situation.

Identifying formerly housed Santa Monicans among the homeless population must be the priority. Disincentivizing the use of Santa Monica as a destination must be a parallel priority.

While being in the homeless state is not a crime, criminal activity by this transient homeless population cannot be tolerated and must be addressed in a permanent manner.

### **What is your philosophy on the appropriate scope of development that should be approved in Santa Monica?**

Business development such as hotels along the beach and commercial development / redevelopment in the downtown should be fully supported as they are the economic engines of the city. Reattracting visitors and residents to our downtown for leisure and shopping is critical initiative to revitalize the city's revenue tax collection to fund City initiatives.

As a fully developed city, Santa Monica suffers from the limitation of developable land. Densification would be the only pathway. The tradeoff is that it increases the cost of land for everyone, which increases housing costs. Moreover, densification is not producing family-sized and family-friendly housing that the city needs. And, in increasing the cost of land, the policy discourages even well-off families from relocating to the city due to the high costs of acquiring single family houses.

The city must strike a balance and ensure it's policies do not exacerbate the existing affordability issue.

### **In what specific ways has Santa Monica failed to address the housing affordability crisis? What concrete steps would you take on Council to better address the crisis?**

The affordability issue has been partly driven by the city's own policy of converting Santa Monica into a world-class visitor and a high-tech destination. Moreover, the city has led the region in the building of housing and has one of the lowest resident to housing unit ratios in the region, if not the state. So, the affordability crisis is partly of its own making. Increasing housing costs by increasing land costs through densification is not the way forward. The less that can be done with a parcel, the less valuable it is. Zoning restrictions must be maintained to slow the escalation of housing costs.

### **How can the City of Santa Monica meet its next RHNA cycle goal of 6,153 new deed restricted affordable housing units for low and moderate income households and 2,721 new market rate housing units?**

Affordable housing a regional issue, not a city-specific issue. Santa Monica has been assigned the second highest affordable housing unit targets per square mile of any city in the SCAG region, if not the

state. That is unfair and does not reflect the resource limitation of the city in terms of water, infrastructure and services. As noted above, public safety is not adequate, and requires more budget resources even with the current population.

Yet, Los Angeles is not planning on locating its affordable housing around Santa Monica. Santa Monica did not contest the SCAG allocation as unfair when it was being developed in 2019. That was a mistake.

Santa Monica has a great track record of building affordable housing at its own pace and should continue with that model. Insisting on concentrating the building of affordable housing in a high-cost locale such as Santa Monica reduces the amount of funding available to produce even more such housing in lower cost areas of Los Angeles County, reducing the overall amount of such housing produced. This issue must be addressed on a regional basis. Having Santa Monica bear the brunt of this subjective allocation process is unfair to the City and to those who could benefit from the additional housing that could be built in lower cost areas.

**What is your assessment of the 2022 Housing Element proposed by City Council?**

The Housing Element was designed to comply with state laws, not to reflect the resource and financial capabilities of the city. The state laws do not require realistic feasibility assessments. In the compilation of this element, the city missed its opportunity to discuss with the state what realistically could and could not be done.

**The Rent Board and its staff have committed to hosting a discussion about the city's rent control law with the community at large. The City has always complemented the Rent Charter's mission in the areas of the City's jurisdiction, including: Tenant Harassment, Code Enforcement, Land Use (AirBnb & corporate rentals laws) and Tenant Relocation Benefits. How would you enhance or change these areas of tenant protections on City Council?**

The Rent Board only committed to hosting a discussion about the city's rent control law with the community at large as a reaction to an innovative proposal by a council member that would have provided relief to 50% of renters in controlled units. This innovative proposal was rejected by the Rent Board, denying those most in need of deserved relief. The Rent Board insisted on perpetuating a regressive increase methodology to the detriment of those in the bottom 50%. This was a very large, missed opportunity.

The Rent Board and the City have created a comprehensive framework of tenant protections that should be maintained

**What do you see as the mission or purpose of Rent Control in a city where 70% of the population are renters?**

Rent Control is about providing those in the lower socio-economic groups with housing cost certainty. Santa Monica has developed into a high-end residential destination, including rentals. Rent Control should continue to protect those whose financial situations are fixed and who are least able to support cost of living increases. Eliminating regressive rent increases would have been an appropriate policy choice. This was a very large missed opportunity.

## **Public Safety**

### **What is your assessment of the role of the Public Safety Reform and Oversight Commission in Santa Monica?**

The PSROC would benefit from a more fully inclusive approach to assessing the role and policy options of policing in Santa Monica. This would include greater outreach to residents and business owners to more fully understand the impacts of the current safety challenges they are being asked to manage on a daily basis. This outreach would also include assessing the number of unreported encounters to gain a more fully developed understanding of the scale and severity of the safety challenges that need to be addressed. Assessing the systemic sources of the criminal challenges should also inform the Commission's approach to policing in Santa Monica.

### **What is your assessment of the OCR Report regarding the police response on May 31, 2020, and what changes to City and SMPD policy should be implemented in light of its findings?**

The OIR report's recommendations were primarily about organizational preparedness, focus and planning. The report essentially pointed out that Santa Monica's police leadership focus reflected a historic threat level more commensurate with a destination beach town than with high-profile city with easy access by criminal elements with an unprecedented level of tech-enabled organization. This threat environment was unknown even 20 years ago. The recommendations were common sense and merit immediate implementation.

Of concern was the observation in the report that in the suspect apprehension and identification chaos that ensued during the event, nearly all of the arrests made on May 31 (289 out of 298) were processed as violations of the City's curfew order and not as the actual crimes they were driven by. This led to misleading statistics and hampered the understanding of the extent of the issues. Prioritizing accurate, timely, and fully inclusive safety data must be a central focus of SMPD policy. Without accurate data, the true scope of the safety challenges cannot be accurately assessed, managed, or funded.

### **What steps do you think need to be taken in the next two years to reduce crime in the City? If this requires additional funding, how should it be funded?**

The City cannot afford the human and financial costs of not adequately addressing the public safety challenges. The public safety challenges are overwhelmingly driven by individuals that do not have their origin or prior domicile in Santa Monica. Transiency is the most common characteristic. Critical initiatives must include significantly improved coordination with Los Angeles County leadership to address policies that are directly impacting the level of crime in Santa Monica. This would need to specifically address the increased amount transient traffic that has been enabled by both the terminus of both the Metro Rail and Metro bus lines in Santa Monica.

The key enabling activity of illegal drug trafficking in the city must be systemically addressed to eliminate key sources of criminal financial gain and unstable behavior that encourages illegal activities.

Increased migration to Santa Monica of individuals with unstable behavior from the introduction of the Metro Rail, combined with a much more unstable demographic of transient population compared to historical norms has overwhelmed the city's public safety capabilities. The demographic shifts also preclude the option of allowing streets to be acceptable campgrounds. Only by eliminating street and



parking structure encampment options will the city be able make real progress in addressing safety to the residents, visitors, business owners and their employees.

**Is the Santa Monica Police Department presently well funded?**

The Santa Monica Police Department (SMPD) is well funded on a per employee basis however more sworn officers are needed and are long past due – the overall budget must be increased. See answer to next question.

**Should more or less of the City budget be allocated to hiring SMPD officers?**

The critical issue here is that the city’s public safety demands have skyrocketed since the authorized sworn force levels were set around 20 years ago. Today’s authorized sworn force size does not reflect the huge increases in organized criminal, transient and unstable demographics that are the key characteristics of the more dangerous threats facing the city and its residents, business owners, employees and visitors.

It is long past time that the sworn force levels be significantly, and permanently, expanded to appropriately address these greatly increased, and inherently more dangerous, public safety threats.

**Do you support efforts to promote investment of general fund monies previously allocated toward armed police response to instead go toward mental health services and other unarmed departments when appropriate?**

The mental health issues are intertwined with the substance abuse issues. Both of these are endemic of the populations transiting through, and lingering in, Santa Monica. As such, these issues represent region-wide problems that Santa Monica alone is completely unequipped to handle. These issues can only be adequately addressed with a regional response. Santa Monica will fail its residents, business owners, their employees and our regional and international visitors if it attempts to address this in isolation. In the meantime, stabilization of safety on the street must be the number one priority. I am opposed to reallocating police monies to other services. I am strongly opposed to the defund the police movement.

**Do you support or oppose efforts to recall District Attorney George Gascón? Do you support DA Gascón’s special directives on restorative justice? If not, what approach should be taken?**

My only interest in DA Gascón’s policies is in the impact his policies are having on the city of Santa Monica. If those policies can improve on-street safety for our residents, business owners, their employees and our regional and international visitors, then I am in full support of him.

If DA Gascón’s policies contribute to maintaining or worsening the public safety of Santa Monica and its streets, then Santa Monica must become more vocal, along with other chartered cities in Los Angeles County, in demanding policy reform that achieves increased and measurable public safety.

**Was the City Council justified in choosing not to implement an indoor vaccine mandate during the omicron surge in January/February 2022? What was your position at the time?**

Yes – Omicron was the beginning of the end of the pandemic. When the virus strain weakened in its effect and became more transmissible, that was science telling us that it is no longer a “Novel” deadly corona virus and has moved towards becoming like the common cold corona virus. My position was the

same during the Omicron surge and I posted and celebrated on social media that it was the beginning of the end of the pandemic.

## **Mobility**

**Should Santa Monica encourage more pedestrian-only streets like the Third Street Promenade? If so, on which streets would you consider this?**

Not until Third Street Promenade is revitalized.

**Do you support additional Metro rail lines being built in Santa Monica, and if so, which potential projects do you support? Which regions of the City would you like to see serviced?**

I would support the extension of the underground subway to Santa Monica straight down the Wilshire Corridor – Subway to the Sea. But we would need additional Police Officers to handle the surge of people to our city.

**Should shared mobility devices and apps (eg, scooters, e-bikes) be encouraged or discouraged in Santa Monica?**

They should be encouraged at a lower price point so that they can be used by residents and for 1<sup>st</sup> mile / last mile purposes. Currently they are too expensive and more so used by tourists and visitors as a fun activity as opposed to a true mobility device.

**Should the overall amount of street parking in Santa Monica be reduced in order to encourage a shift away from cars toward other modes of transportation?**

NO

## **Ballot Measures**

**Do you support California Proposition 1?**

Yes, I support California Proposition One, a statewide constitutional amendment that will assure that the state cannot interfere with an individual's reproductive freedom.

**Do you support the citizens' initiative ballot measure which would tax real estate transactions over \$8M and provide revenue for affordable housing, rent subsidy, and SMMUSD? Why/why not?**

No, I do not support the citizens' initiative ballot measure to tax real estate transactions over \$8M because I am not convinced that Santa Monicans will benefit. Also, if it passes, this tax would be the highest property transfer tax in California.

**Do you support the competing council-approved ballot measure which would tax real estate transactions over \$8M and provide revenue into the general fund? Why/why not?**

YES, as an alternative to the above measure only.

**Do you support the rent control ballot measure which would permanently lower the rent control General Adjustment cap from 6% down to 3%?**

YES – although the max cap dollar amount is regressive, and I would have rather seen the alternative measure which provided more relief to the rent control units which were below the median MAR levels (discussed below in a separate question.)

**Do you support the SMC bond measure?**

NO - I am a signer of the rebuttal to the argument in favor of the SMC facilities Bond Measure.

**Do you support the 1% transient occupancy tax ballot measure?**

YES - I support increasing the City's Transient Occupancy Tax (TOT) rate by 1 percentage point for hotels (currently 14%) as a way to help city services return to levels that were normal before the pandemic. The funds will assist in the expansion of the Police Department's Downtown Services Unit (DSU) and help make our city safer.

**Do you support the cannabis business tax ballot measure?**

Yes – I am a signer for the Argument In Favor of the Ballot Measure.

**Federal Legislation Do you support the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 which just passed Congress? It compromises on many of the important provisions included in the previous Build Back Better Act. Do you think it's good enough?**

Yes on the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022. I was a proponent of the original BBB and disappointed in Joe Manchin for killing it.

**What do you think of legislation proposed since Roe v Wade was struck down – designed to protect other previously assumed fundamental freedoms? Notably: the Right to Contraception Act (HR 8373) and the Respect for Marriage Act (HR 8404) which would codify into federal law the rights for access to contraception and same-sex and interracial marriage.**

I support both HR 8373 and HR 8404

**Do you think we need the Protecting Access to Medication Abortion Act (S 4467)? It defends access to medication abortion in states where the right to an abortion is still protected.**

Yes

**Do you support the Medicare For All Act (HR 1976)? Whether you support that bill or not, how can we ensure universal, single payer health care coverage for all Santa Monicans?**

YES on HR 1976 - The City can create an ad-hoc Health Committee to prepare a platform supporting single payer healthcare which are best embodied in bills in the U.S. Congress calling for the establishment of Medicare for All (HR 1976.) The City Council can adopt this platform to show its position of Very Strong Support for Medicare for All.

**Additional Questions What steps must Santa Monica take to enact a Green New Deal in our own city, if any?**

We need to invest in our local infrastructure and ensure that it can accommodate new development. We should conduct a through study and assessment of our existing infrastructure, its deficiencies, and

what is needed to adequately maintain as well as expand our infrastructure to accommodate growth. We should explore funding sources outside of Santa Monica to meaningfully address our aging and inadequate infrastructure needs to meet the growth demanded of us by the state.

**Although marijuana is legal in California for recreational use, there are currently no dispensaries operating in Santa Monica. Why is this the case, and should that be changed? If dispensaries are allowed in Santa Monica, what processes would govern the business approval process to ensure equity?**

I am a supporter and one of the prime signatories on the arguments for the cannabis business tax ballot measure. Although Santa Monica residents are progressive, the old management structure in our city was conservative and has not allowed dispensaries in our city even though discussions have been around for ten years.

Local stores in Santa Monica should be opened to allow seniors and people of all ages to get healthy, safe, organic local products that are controlled within our own communities. Santa Monica Seniors will not need to drive outside of Santa Monica to buy cannabis products which can be offered in a safe, clean environment within our own communities.

Local cannabis stores are long overdue in our city and we need to fast track an RFP process to select responsible store operators. As part of the RFP process, we should include a strong local hire provision to include Santa Monica residents reflective of our diverse community.

**What role do you believe the Santa Monica Democratic Club should have in our City?**

The Santa Monica Democratic Club plays an important role in Santa Monica and has for many years. The SMDC provides a meaningful community service by hosting forums to inform the community about federal and state legislation and to discuss important issues.

**If elected, how would you attempt to interact with the Santa Monica Democratic Club and other political organizations to ensure community buy-in on new proposals?**

In my view the role of the SMDC should not be to “ensure community buy-in” so much as to engage the community and foster open discussions where the views of the residents are heard and respected.

I would keep an open dialogue with all members of the community including the SMDC.