

Iowa City Council Member and Mayor Pro-Tem Mazahir Salih Announces She Will Not Run for Re-Election.

Salih to Endorse Local Educator and Community Activist Shawn Harmsen as he Launches Campaign for Iowa City Council District B

(Iowa City) – Iowa City Councilor and Mayor Pro-Tem Mazahir Salih announced Wednesday evening that she is not seeking a second term on the council, and is throwing her support behind educator and Iowa City community activist Shawn Harmsen, who launched his campaign for District B at the joint event.

“When I went on to the council four years ago I had already spent years working on behalf of workers, immigrants, people of color, and helping to give a voice to those who weren’t being heard in the community,” said Salih. “I could never have anticipated how important that experience would prove to be, given the events that unfolded during my time on the Council.”

Salih said during her time on the council she is particularly proud of pushing for and helping secure a 15 dollar an hour minimum wage for all city employees, making sure the city invested in affordable housing for hard working Iowa City families, and fighting for responsible development that is inclusive and future-focused. She has also worked on significantly improving and expanding transportation opportunities for all Iowa City residents, and noted that since she has been on council the city has expanded translation and interpretation services so immigrants can access city services.

When the global pandemic struck in the spring of 2020, Salih became Interim Director at the Center for Worker Justice, which shifted to around-the-clock crisis support programming to provide emergency financial assistance, health related referrals, and school-related information to low-income and immigrant families who were disproportionately affected by the pandemic.

“It has been a painful and exhausting year for so many in our community,” notes Salih, “but I’m grateful that I was in a position to see firsthand the needs and barriers our residents faced and take immediate action to help target city assistance where it was most needed and make our

programs accessible to all our residents, across race, language, ethnicity, or immigration status.”

After a competitive national search, Salih was named Executive Director of the Center for Worker Justice this spring.

“Now, I am called to serve my community in a new way. As a co-founder of CWJ, I’m proud to devote my full energies to leading the organization in its work to confront workplace abuses, promote dignity in jobs and housing, and create an inclusive community. As much as I knew I had to focus on my new position at CWJ and family demands, I agonized about stepping down from the council because of all of the work there is to do,” said Salih. “When I realized Shawn was interested in running, it was a huge relief. Shawn is one of the most principled community leaders I know. For years, he has worked tirelessly behind the scenes to promote leadership of women and people of color in our community. He has fought for the rights of mobile home residents like his mom, and for workers’ rights. He’s the perfect person to continue our work on the council to make this a more just and inclusive community.”

Harmsen, who lives in Iowa City with his wife, Jody, and two kids Katy and Jack, said it is humbling and touching to have the support of Salih.

“Mazahir is a powerful leader who leaves behind enormous shoes to fill,” Harmsen said. “Nobody can really replace what having her on the council has meant for Iowa City. But I can do my best to continue enacting our shared vision for a community that lives up to its potential for economic, racial, and social justice.”

Harmsen says his years of local activism and political work informed his decision to run for city council.

“Affordable housing has long been an important issue to me, but it hit home in our family two years ago when a predatory investment firm bought up my mom’s mobile home park in North Liberty and decided the first thing they were going to do was jack up the rent almost 60 percent,” said Harmsen. “So since then I’ve been working to help mom and the members of her community – and communities like theirs across the state – to organize and fight back. That experience is one of many that inspires me to be a local leader who will continue to fight for the basic principle that housing is a human right.”

“I also believe Iowa City has to keep pushing on issues of racial equity, justice, and truly equal opportunity, from policing to housing to zoning and much more,” Harmsen continued. “Most people who know me know that I have worked the last several years to help push our community in the right direction by rolling up my sleeves and helping get some amazing women elected to local office.”

Harmsen served as campaign manager for Mazahir Salih and Johnson County Supervisor Royceann Porter, served on the campaign committee for North Liberty Council Member

RaQuishia Harrington, and was Megan Alter's campaign manager during her first bid for office two years ago.

"I believe in Megan as much today as I did two years ago, and I will continue supporting Megan's run this year for an at-large seat while I campaign myself for the District B seat," Harmsen said.

"I will likewise continue supporting Mayor Teague's campaign for reelection," Harmsen said. "I have seen on a personal level Bruce's kindness and humanity, and we all owe him and other local leaders a debt of gratitude for doing all they could in the face of the COVID pandemic when our state leaders dropped the ball. Because of our local leaders, there are Iowa City residents alive today who otherwise wouldn't be."

Salih says she trusts Harmsen to listen to all the voices in the community, and to do the right thing.

"I worked with Shawn before I was in office, I worked with Shawn while I was on the council, and I will continue working with Shawn after he is on the council to keep making our community better," said Salih, who was the first Sudanese-American immigrant to win elected office in the United States when she won her council race four years ago.

Harmsen grew up in rural Clinton County, graduated from Wartburg College in Waverly, Iowa, and launched a career in radio and then television news that took him to stations in Waterloo, Spencer, Galesburg, Mason City, and Duluth. After earning a Master's degree in Communication Education from the University of Northern Iowa in 2005, he taught as an adjunct at the University of Wisconsin-Superior when he wasn't busy being a stay at home dad. In 2010, Harmsen and his family moved to Iowa City so he could pursue his PhD in Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Iowa. While completing his PhD, Harmsen got involved in local activism as the political action chair for UE Local 896-COGS, the union representing graduate students. Harmsen has taught at Coe College in Cedar Rapids since 2016 and his wife, Dr. Jody Harmsen, is a Family Medicine doctor. His two kids are students in the Iowa City Community School District.

"I love Iowa City," Harmsen said. "I am well aware that our community isn't perfect. But between my job and my wife's job, we've lived in a lot of places in the Midwest, and this is the place we've chosen to make our home. This city, and the people here, are worth every effort to keep creating a better, more equitable community."

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