



Mayor Libby Schaaf, Oakland, California. Credit: Noah Berger.

**Mayor Libby Schaaf** was born and raised in Oakland. During her six-year tenure, the city has undergone an economic revitalization and building boom and has cut gun violence nearly in half. Schaaf has worked to stabilize rents, decrease evictions, and address homelessness, and was appointed to California's first Council of Regional Homeless Advisors in 2019. She created Oakland's first Department of Transportation, prioritizing projects in underserved neighborhoods and addressing the city's decades-old infrastructure backlog. She also launched Oakland Promise, a cradle-to-career initiative that improves educational outcomes for local students. This spring, Schaaf responded to the coronavirus crisis with a successful lockdown, reconfiguring streets for pedestrian uses and housing homeless people in vacant hotel rooms. She talked with Senior Fellow Anthony Flint about the experience and about the future of cities.

This interview is also available as part of our **Land Matters** podcast series: [www.lincolninst.edu/publications/multimedia/podcast-oakland-aims-build-back-better](http://www.lincolninst.edu/publications/multimedia/podcast-oakland-aims-build-back-better).

## In the Midst of a Crisis, Oakland Aims to Be the “Silver Lining City”

**ANTHONY FLINT:** How did the pandemic unfold for you, and how has your job changed since this all began?

**LIBBY SCHAAF:** We were one of the very first places to have to confront this crisis. I remember I got the call from Governor Gavin Newsom, and we were being asked to allow the [Grand Princess] cruise ship to disembark. . . . We have to say forcefully that we are members of an interdependent human community that must put people over profits and that must put health first, and that we must model generosity and the right values in moments of crisis. And so I accepted the request. We made sure to constantly remind people of the historical context of environmental racism that had been visited upon West Oakland [the city's port area] and we also pushed our federal and state partners to [take] extra measures to ensure community and worker safety during the operation. It was very heartening to be able to provide that safe harbor, but it was a very unusual entry for me into the COVID crisis . . . my initial attention was external, to these outsiders that needed help from my city, then [I needed] to quickly pivot internally as we began to see cases unfold right in our community.

I have not been to City Hall but one time in the last few weeks. So my life has changed tremendously on a personal level. I've learned that I'm really bad at cutting my son's hair. I've learned that my husband is an amazing cook and I've learned that our Slow Streets in Oakland are an amazing comfort, as I got to enjoy the first one in my neighborhood recently.

I know that a quarter of my workforce in Oakland has lost their jobs, and it is such a sobering reality. I have shifted a tremendous amount of my time and energy to communications and crisis management. [But I also] want Oakland to be the “silver lining” city. I want us to exploit every opportunity in this crisis to make lasting structural change that needs to be made and needed to be made before the crisis. The crisis is only exacerbating things like structural racism, like economic disparity, and we have an opportunity to not just respond in the moment, but to make some lasting changes and to take advantage of a new level of national awareness. The health disparities by race is something that is finally getting national attention. Let’s take that awareness, let’s take what is hopefully an elevation of political will, and pass some laws so that we don’t see these kinds of disparities again.

**AF:** You’ve received a lot of attention for building on the Slow Streets program and extending closures and other measures to accommodate social distancing and encourage biking and walking and using scooters. Do you think this might be a turning point for the public realm in cities everywhere?

**LS:** Without question: this is a turning point. I really want to shout out to my director of the Department of Transportation, Ryan Russo, who saw the opportunity to repurpose analysis that had already been done to create our bike plan so that he knew in an instant the 74 miles—the 10 percent of our roadways—that were eligible to be shut to through traffic and used as Slow Streets. So again, recognizing that you can repurpose work you’ve already done in a crisis, is brilliant.

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Credit: Jaegar Moore via Flickr CC BY 2.0.



Oakland earned national attention for closing 74 miles of its streets to through traffic this spring, creating space for physical activity and physical distancing while ensuring continued access to essential businesses. Credit: Oakland Slow Streets.



I know that people are worried about the future of public transit. People are worried, are we going to go back to the car culture where we have solo drivers in their isolated pods spewing pollution and emissions and stressing out everyone because we're all stuck in traffic jams. We cannot go back to that. Slow Streets are . . . a place to give our residents a safe way to have a mental health respite by being outdoors, by having a safe, convenient place right in their own neighborhood to exercise, to send the kids out on their scooters and their roller skates to blow some steam off in a way that is socially distant.

But it's a reminder that the public right-of-way is the public's. It's not just for cars. And we've been underutilizing this precious asset in so many ways. It has been truly one of my favorite silver linings to see the joy of our residents enjoying those Slow Streets. We're experimenting, and government doesn't do that enough. And that's once again a silver lining of this crisis—that people are trying things and the tolerance for risk-taking from our public is much higher, because they realize this is a crisis; we've got to do things differently. We've got to test things out, but we're doing it in a very responsive way. We are getting continual feedback from the public about what they like and what they don't like . . . We're shifting, we're evolving, but I can promise you that much of this is going to remain once the health crisis is over. People are loving it.

**AF: In terms of mass transit, it's really the lifeblood of cities, and its fate is uncertain. How can mobility policies adapt to this new reality?**

**LS:** Well, I want to start with our bus system because they made some quick changes that have been wonderful. And again, maybe things that we're never going to go back on. They stopped charging fares. Boom. What that allows them to do is board people from the back doors of the bus as well as the front; people are on and off faster. They don't have to go by the driver. It's less stress on the drivers, faster operations, less . . . touching and exchange. There are ways that we can kind of socially distance within public transit. Now, that's going to be a lot harder on a BART car. I used to ride BART several times a week and I joked about getting close to my constituents—because you definitely were pressed up against your fellow man . . . that is not something that's going to make sense for some time.

But rather than get people back in their cars, we're excited about trying to accelerate the use of electric bikes and scooters. Oakland a long time ago used to have the nickname "Oaksterdam," mostly because of our embracing of cannabis. But let's be Oaksterdam for bike riding. It's a healthier way of getting around. It's safer. And that is a pivot that we can make. All I know is that we cannot afford to get back into our cars again. That is not an option.

**AF:** All the economic disruption at a macro level is just staggering, but in terms of cities and downtowns, it's hit some of the basic building blocks—retail, restaurants, office space, residential. How is this likely to alter our urban future?

**LS:** We've seen construction continue; people are continuing to pull permits. The Bay Area had a significant housing crisis before COVID-19 and arguably we will have an even worse one after COVID-19, particularly for affordable housing and addressing our homelessness problems. So I have been encouraged to see that development continue . . . . We are already working with our business districts to see if they might want us to close those streets off so that restaurants and shops can spread out onto the sidewalk and into the roadway. We know that this virus is far more deadly in interior spaces, and particularly when people remain in a small interior space for long periods of time, so anything you do outdoors is going to be much safer. So why not create more of a marketplace atmosphere that could make some of these commercial areas even more attractive?

Cities are not going away. Just because you have to socially distance does not mean you can't do that in a small apartment with someone above and below you and next to you. Cities are efficient. They allow us to deliver services more rapidly. Sprawl is not a healthy response. Smart density and the agility and creativity of cities is what's going to allow us to not just get through this health crisis, but emerge with a more equitable, healthy environment. [Look at] the lessons we've learned about how our planet is benefiting from the lack of car emissions. We've got to keep these lessons and not just go back to business as usual.

I know it seems like a funny time to sound optimistic. This is a horrid tragedy. Like many people, I have lost loved ones to this disease, and the severity of it is not to be underestimated in any way. And yet we have to see these opportunities. We have to seize them and that is our challenge right now. Anyone who's mayor of a major city has to be a bit on the optimistic side. That's what keeps us going, particularly during times like these. □



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A protest on the streets of Oakland in late May. Credit: Annette Bernhardt via Flickr CC BY 2.0.