

## **Interview with Greg Freeman, 2024 Candidate for Maricopa County Assessor**

**By Clay Latimer, March 2024**

It's the American dream: a home of your own. Yet it feels more like an illusion these days to many Arizonans. That must change if the state expects to flourish, says Greg Freeman, a lifelong Arizona native and Democratic candidate for Maricopa County assessor.

He should know. Having worked in the real estate industry for years, he's seen the housing shortage evolve into a full-blown crisis, locking out middle-class families and young people from home ownership, leaving hundreds of thousands burdened with high rents, and sending thousands of working people into public shelters or homelessness.

So severe is the shortage that industry experts say Phoenix needs a quarter million new homes to rectify the crisis. "If we don't build enough houses, then more people are going to be sleeping on street corners or under bridges," he said. "We could become like California, where average people can forget about buying their own place. "One of the fundamental American Dreams is having your own plot of land and a home to call your own. I want every hard-working Arizonan to have a chance to own a home of their own. This is what I stand for.

The job of the county assessor is to identify, map, and assess properties for property tax and other functions. Freeman will face Republican incumbent Eddie Cook. Although he says he never intended to enter politics, Freeman has been preparing for this race in many ways for much of his life.

He grew up in northwest Phoenix and attended Colorado Mines. When he returned to this area he went into real estate, working as an escrow officer, notary, residential leasing agent, and construction manager. He is currently a commercial property manager at MPB Realty.

Freeman never imagined a crisis of this magnitude afflicting his hometown. "We're dealing with things that would be unthinkable here when I was growing up," he said. "I don't know how else to put it other than to say: it's unAmerican that so many people are on a knife's edge all the time. It's a breakdown of everything that I grew up with, everything that I know this country to be capable of."

For decades, affordable housing fueled Maricopa County's remarkable growth and prosperity. But when the market crashed in 2008, spooking home builders, new construction screeched to a halt. The COVID-19 pandemic, supply chain difficulties, rising interest rates, and inflation fed the flames. "It's a hugely complex problem and the county assessor alone will not fix this problem.

It's going to take a lot of us working together to do that. But an assessor has some influence," said Freeman, who serves on the North Mountain and Deer Valley zoning commissions in Phoenix and is on the board of the Bell Road Business Alliance, Black Mountain Community Alliance, and Kidzchiro Foundation.

At the top of Freeman's list of practical solutions is revisiting the 2016 law that stripped cities of their authority to regulate vacation rentals. The measure was designed to allow individuals to rent out a spare room to make a little side money. Instead, hedge funds and real estate investors - many from outside the state - swooped in and bought up homes and apartments, converting them to short-term rentals and denying housing to local residents.

“They would buy an apartment building, slap a coat of paint on it, throw everybody out, and raise the cost fifty percent,” he said. “You’re talking about meanness.” During that time, Phoenix rents spiked more than 35% - consuming half or more of some family’s incomes- -and Arizona's homeless population increased by 23%. “Instead of favoring tax breaks for out-of-state investment corporations and short-term rental companies, I will stand for these companies to contribute their fair portion of taxes so that the neighborhoods they operate in can thrive,” he said.

Despite the dire shortage, plans for affordable apartments and high-density housing draw more opposition than ever. “Not in my backyard,” goes the refrain. In Chandler, a developer for an affordable apartment project was booed and accused of lying about traffic and school crowding during a raucous public meeting.

In Buckeye, plans were shelved for a similar project after residents claimed rentals would increase crime and bring down property values. But Freeman says the tide appears to be turning. In March, Democratic Gov. Katie Hobbs and other officials celebrated the groundbreaking for Centerline on Glendale, a 368-unit apartment project for households making 60% or below the area's median income. If he defeats Cook, Freeman intends to help launch similar projects across Metro Phoenix. “I understand that I've signed up for an uphill [battle]. But to me, it's an opportunity to speak about what I've seen in the world. And really, just to stand for an Arizona that works,” he said. “We can do better.”