



Aftab Pureval, elected in 2021, is making history as Cincinnati's first Asian American mayor. He was raised in Southwest Ohio, the son of first-generation Americans, and worked at a toy store when he was in middle school. After graduating from the Ohio State University and the University of Cincinnati Law School, Pureval held several positions in the legal community, including counsel at Procter & Gamble, before entering public service. He served as Hamilton County Clerk of Courts from 2016 to 2021, and was the first Democrat to hold that office in over 100 years. Pureval resides in the north Cincinnati neighborhood of Clifton with his wife and their two sons.

He spoke with Senior Fellow Anthony Flint earlier this year for the *Land Matters* podcast; their full conversation is available at [www.lincolnst.edu/publications/podcasts-videos](http://www.lincolnst.edu/publications/podcasts-videos). This transcript has been edited for length and clarity.

Top: Cincinnati, Ohio. Credit: pawel.gaul via iStock/Getty Images Plus.  
Inset: Aftab Pureval. Credit: Amanda Rossmann/USA Today Network.

## Housing and Hope in Cincinnati

**ANTHONY FLINT:** *You've attracted a lot of attention for what some have called a "heroic undertaking" to preserve the city's single-family housing stock and keep it out of the hands of outside investors. Briefly, walk us through what was accomplished in coordination with the Port of Cincinnati.*

**AFTAB PUREVAL:** Just to provide a little more context, Cincinnati is a legacy city. We have a proud, long tradition of being the final destination from the Underground Railroad. We were the doorstep to freedom for so many slaves who were escaping that horrific experience. We have a lot of historic neighborhoods, a lot of historic buildings, and we have a lot of aging infrastructure and aging single-family homes, which—paired with the fact that we are an incredibly affordable city in the national context—makes us a prime target for institutional investors.

Unfortunately, Cincinnati is on national list after national list about the rate of increase for our rents. It's primarily being driven by these out-of-town investors—who have no interest in the well-being of Cincinnati or their tenants—buying up cheap single-family homes, not doing anything to invest in

them, but overnight doubling or tripling the rents. The city is doing a lot of things through litigation, through code enforcement . . . to let them know that we're not playing around. If you're going to exercise predatory behavior in our community, we're not going to stand for it.

We've also done things on the front end to prevent this from happening by partnering with the Port. . . . When several properties went up for sale because an institutional investor put them on the selling block, the Port spent \$14.5 million to buy over 190 single-family homes, outbidding 13 other institutional investors. . . . Over the past year, the Port has been working to bring those properties into compliance [and match them] with qualified buyers, oftentimes folks who are working in poverty or lower middle-class who've never owned a home before. Just this year we're making three of those 194 available for sale. It's a huge success across the board . . . but it's just one tool that the Port and the city are working on to increase affordability of housing in all of our neighborhoods.

**AF:** *What did you learn from this that might be transferable to other cities? It takes a lot of capital to outbid an institutional investor.*

**AP:** It does require a lot of funds. That's why we need more flexibility from the federal government and the state government to provide municipalities with the tools to prevent this from happening in the first place. Now, once an institutional investor gets their claws into a community, there's very little that the city can do to hold them accountable.

The better strategy, as we've seen, is to buy up properties on the front end. A lot of cities have a lot of dollars from the federal government through the American Rescue Plan (ARP). We have used a lot of ARP dollars not just to get money into the hands of people who need it most, which is critically important in this time, but also to partner with other private-public partnerships or the Port to give them the resources necessary to buy up land and hold it.

This is a unique time in cities where they have more flexibility [with] the resources coming from the federal government. I would encourage any mayor, any council, to really think critically about using the funds not just in the short term but also in the long term to address some of these macroeconomic forces.

**AF:** *Cincinnati has become a more popular place to live, and the population has increased slightly after years of decline. Do you consider Cincinnati a pandemic or climate haven? What are the implications of that growth?*

**AP:** What I love about my job as mayor is my focus isn't necessarily on the next two or four years, but the next 100 years. Right now, we are living through a paradigm shift because of the pandemic. The way we live, work, and play is just completely changing. Remote work is completely altering our economic lifestyle throughout the entire country, but particularly here in the Midwest.

One of more than 190 homes purchased by the Port of Cincinnati as part of an effort to preserve affordability and local homeownership. Credit: The Port of Greater Cincinnati Development Authority.



What I am convinced of is because of climate change, because of the rising cost of living on the coast, there will be an inward migration. I don't know if it's in the next 50 or 75 years, but it will happen. We're already seeing large businesses making decisions based on climate change. Just two hours north of Cincinnati, Intel is making a \$200 billion investment to create the largest semiconductor plant in the country, drawn by our access to fresh water and our region's climate resiliency.

Now, don't get me wrong: we're all affected by climate change . . . but in Ohio and Cincinnati, we're not seeing the wildfires, the droughts, the hurricanes, the earthquakes, the coastal erosion that we're seeing in other parts of the country, which makes us a climate-change safe haven not just for business investment but also for people.

Cincinnati is partly growing because our economy's on fire right now, but we're going to really see, I believe, exponential growth over the next few decades because of these massive factors pushing people into the middle of the country. To make sure that the investments in the future and the population growth in the future do not displace our current residents, we've got to stabilize our market now and be prepared for that growth.

**AF:** *What are the land use changes and transportation improvements that you're concentrating on accordingly?*

**AP:** If we're going to get this right, we have to have a comprehensive review and reform of our land use policies. We have been having meetings with stakeholders to [explore what] a modern Cincinnati looks like. I believe it looks like a dense, diverse neighborhood that's walkable, with good public transportation and investments in public art. Right now, the City of Cincinnati's zoning is not encouraging those kinds of neighborhoods. Close to 70 percent of our city is zoned for single-family use



Cincinnati's electric streetcar travels a 3.6-mile loop connecting several areas of the city. Credit: 5chw4r7z via Flickr CC BY-SA 2.0.

exclusively, which is putting an artificial cap on the amount of supply that we can create, which is artificially increasing rents and artificially increasing property taxes, which is causing a lot of our legacy residents, even those who own their homes, to be displaced.

If we're serious about deconcentrating poverty and desegregating our city, then we've got to take a look at multifamily unit prohibitions. We've got to take a look at parking requirements for both businesses and homes. We've got to look at transit-oriented development along our bus rapid transit lines. We've got to look at creative opportunities to create more housing like auxiliary dwelling units, but none of this is easy. . . . I am confident we can make some substantive changes to our zoning code to encourage more affordability, encourage more public transportation, and just be a greener city. On that note, we have made a commitment that we will only buy city vehicles that are electric vehicles when they become available. We have the largest city-led solar farm in the entire country, which is significantly contributing to our energy consumption.



**AF:** *A little bit of this is back to the future, because the city had streetcars. Do you have the sense that there's an appreciation for that, that those times actually made the city function better?*

**AP:** The city used to be dense, used to have incredible streetcars, public transportation, and then, unfortunately, cities—not just Cincinnati but across the country—saw a steady decline of population, losing folks to the suburbs. Now people want to come back into the city, but now we have the hard work of undoing what a lot of cities tried to do, which was create suburban neighborhoods within a city to attract those suburban people back. It's a little bit undoing the past while also focusing on what used to exist.

**AF:** *What worries you most about this kind of transition, and what do you identify as the major issues facing lower-income and communities of color in Cincinnati?*

**AP:** Displacement. If we cannot be a city that our current residents can afford, they will leave, which hurts everything. If the city is not growing, then a city our size, where we're located in the country, we are dying, and we are dying quickly. Cities our size have to grow, and in order to grow, not only do we need to recruit talent, but we have to preserve the families and the legacy communities that have been here in the first place.

No city in the country has figured out a way to grow without displacement. The market factors, the economic factors are so profound and so hard to influence, and the city's resources are so limited, it's really difficult. . . . Oftentimes, I guess I get frustrated that I don't have enough resources, enough authority to make a meaningful

impact on the macroeconomic forces that are coming into the city. Because if we get our dream, which is more investment, more growth, that comes with negative consequences, and it's really difficult to manage both.

**AF:** *The mayor's website says Cincinnati is well positioned to be a leader in climate change at home and abroad. What do you think the city has to offer that's distinctive in terms of climate action?*

**AP:** All of our policy initiatives are looked at through two lenses. The first is racial equity and the second is climate—everything that we do, whether it's our urban forestry assessment, looking at a heat map of our city and investing in trees to not just clean the air but also cool our neighborhoods, [or] our investments in biochar. We are one of only three cities in the entire world that received a huge grant from the Bloomberg Philanthropies to continue to innovate in the world of biochar, which is a byproduct of burning wood, which is an incredible carbon magnet that helps with stormwater runoff but also pulls carbon out of the air.

Ultimately, businesses and people who are looking to the future consider climate change in that future. If you're looking for a city that is climate resilient but also making massive investments in climate technology, then Cincinnati is that destination for you. □

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**Anthony Flint** is a senior fellow at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, host of the *Land Matters* podcast, and a contributing editor to *Land Lines*.

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