



2013 Albemarle Board of Supervisors Candidate Interview

Candidate: Liz Palmer (D)

On November 5, 2013, voters in the Samuel Miller Magisterial District go to the polls to elect their representative on the Albemarle County Board of Supervisors. This recording is Brian Wheeler's September 27, 2013 interview with Liz Palmer (D). Palmer's opponent is incumbent Duane Snow (R).

The audio of this interview and complete election coverage is available on the Charlottesville Tomorrow website:

http://www.cvilletomorrow.org/topics/county_elections/

INTERVIEW

Dr. Palmer, thank you for participating in this interview with Charlottesville Tomorrow. The complete audio and written transcript for this interview will be available online.

Information from this interview will be used in the compilation of the non-partisan voter guide being co-produced by Charlottesville Tomorrow, The Daily Progress, and the League of Women Voters. Charlottesville Tomorrow does not endorse any candidates and our goal is to provide information to the public so they can make an informed vote on issues primarily related to land use, transportation, public education, and community design.

As you are aware, some of the questions you will be asked have been provided in advance, others have not. All Albemarle Supervisor candidates will be asked the same questions. We ask that you keep these questions confidential until all candidates have been interviewed.

Each candidate will be provided an opportunity to review the excerpts selected for the voter guide before its publication. Are you ready to start?

1. Please describe your past experience that qualifies you to be on the Albemarle Board of Supervisors.

I am a veterinarian and I've been practicing for over 30 years now. I have my own small business which is a mobile practice. I have four children, three of which went to Albemarle County Schools and I have been engaged in civic activities for about 15 years. I got involved in county government because I was very concerned about the Moormans River. Our problem was that we were drawing too much water out of the Moormans River in order to provide water to the urban area. We were actually drying out this river. When I found out about this I called up the [Rivanna Water & Sewer Authority] and tried to find out what the problem was and I found that the over withdrawal was due to aging infrastructure, an inability to actually turn valves off, and that the Rivanna Water & Sewer Authority was not interested in protecting rivers. It's only mandate was to supply water to the urban area.

So I got involved then and I got very concerned about getting a water supply plan in that protected rivers and supplied water for the people in the urban area for the future. I started working on how to pay for that. That's always the issue, how do we pay for infrastructure. So I joined the League of Women Voters and we worked on that for several years.

I was then appointed to the Albemarle County Service Authority, which is the water board, which makes the decisions on how we take care of our infrastructure. I worked on water pricing, and we revamped our water pricing policies and increased our connection charges. I worked with the city and the county, the business community and environmental groups, to pass a comprehensive water supply plan. It was quite a feat to do that. I look at it as a case study in how to do infrastructure repairs, how to pay for them, on a larger scale for the county.

I think that's given me a great deal of experience in how county government works. I know the players. I also have served on a variety of other boards. I have also been a member of the League of Women Voters for several years. And the League teaches us and emphasizes citizen involvement. It is extremely important. Our government would not work well at all if citizens are not engaged, and the League spends a tremendous amount of time trying to get that to occur. So that is my experience.

2. What is your top priority for action by the board of supervisors if you are elected?

My top priority has to be what the top priority is of the Samuel Miller District citizens. As I have been going door to door, what I hear over and over again is education. This is what they are interested in. They want quality schools. They want them properly funded. They want an excellent education for their children, and for everybody's children.

3. Do you support the construction of the Western Bypass of U.S. 29? Why or why not?

I am not in favor of the Western Bypass. If it goes through, if it continues to move forward, I certainly will do my utmost to make it the best road we can make it. I am very concerned also about the way it was passed, in the midnight vote, unbeknownst to the citizens of the community.

As far as the bypass itself, I don't feel as though it solves our problem, it doesn't solve our problem. It doesn't take enough traffic off of 29 and the level of service on 29 after the bypass is still going to be poor. What I do support is the Places29 [master plan] and the Go29 plan that this community has created after years of work and citizen involvement. That includes the compact overpasses at Hydraulic Road to eliminate the source of congestion and allow through traffic on 29 flow without stopping and also the compact overpass at Rio that solves that traffic snarl. The Berkmar Bridge is an extremely important part of that plan. It extends Berkmar Drive up to Hollymead Town Center and beyond so that drivers can go from K-Mart to Lowes to Target without getting on 29. It also eliminates the bottleneck between the Rivanna River and Hollymead by widening 29.

What this does is it actually solves the problem for our citizens here in the community, and it also improves the [travel] time over the 29 bypass and it costs less money. So it is the fiscally prudent way to go. Taxpayers for Common Sense has listed the bypass as one of the eight most wasteful transportation projects in the United States. So I think from the standpoint of relieving congestion on 29, and being a fiscally conservative person, I would definitely favor the Places29/Go29 plan over the bypass.

4. Name one specific area of the county budget that you are concerned about and why. Do you think it deserves more funding or less?

One of the things that has concerned me most about the budget is our lack of funding of the capital fund. We have, over the last several years, we have been using it for maintenance projects and we have not been putting any more money into it for long term projects. That's very concerning. It makes us less efficient in our choices in how we use our capital. We have a

tremendous number of long term projects in the way of schools that we have to take care of in the future and I am most concerned about properly funding our capital fund.

5. Are the cash proffers paid by residential real estate developers too much, too little, or just about the right amount to contribute to the costs for community infrastructure?

We know that the property taxes that a single family residential home pays each year does not cover the costs of the services that that family needs. We have been told many times that that's why we need to increase our economic base to get more money from sales tax and commercial real estate. The cash proffers are our only real way at this point to solve the problem. We have a revenue problem. There's no free lunch and we have to figure out how to pay for growth.

At the [Albemarle County Service Authority] what we've done is we increased our connection charges in order to do that. We've had a policy for several years now of growth pays for growth. The developers have not been particularly happy about it and it does increase the cost of homes, definitely. But it's the only really fair way to do this. We can't really put the cost of growth on the current residents.

If you look at some of the communities that have a high growth rate like Loudoun County, they have a much higher property tax, and that's what would happen if we didn't have the cash proffers. So I think it's important to keep them. What the exact number should be I'm perfectly willing to look at. Things change from year-to-year on the cost of services, they may need to go up, they may be the same, or we may need to reduce them, but it's our only tool right now to have growth pay for growth, and it's an important policy.

6. If real estate tax revenues increase, should Albemarle lower its property tax rate? Why or why not?

Of course that really depends, it depends on how much it goes up. Recently we have had a lot of fluctuation in our actual revenue that we are getting from real estate tax because our home prices have been changing. That creates a very unstable source of revenue. That's a problem. So equalization of the tax rate is definitely a tool we should be using.

It depends. We know property values are going up right now, it's been estimated they are going to go up about one percent in the next year. So we would have to look at the budget to see what we would do with that. But generally speaking I believe in the equalization of the tax rate to make sure that we have a stable source of revenue.

7. What is the best example to date of Albemarle County's neighborhood model form of development and why do you like it? What improvements could be made to our community's placemaking efforts?

I think it has to be Old Trail at this point. Old Trail has the shopping there, it has limited shopping but it does have some shopping. It has a senior [living] facility, it has younger families there, it has walkable streets, trails. The most important thing I think to do is get that walkability, to get people out of their houses, get them interacting, and have common spaces where people can gather--green spaces are important and trails for exercise.

As far as what we can do to increase our placemaking efforts, I think [we should take] a more comprehensive look at the different areas. I am very interested in looking at revitalization of some of the areas on [U.S. Route] 29 north. I think we need more greenways rather than just pocket parks. There's a lot of opportunity for getting greenways in with bicycle paths and pedestrian walkways. The urban ring right now is impenetrable to bicycles and pedestrians, I'd like to see that change. I think that's probably one of the most important things we need to do in our placemaking efforts. We need more common space.

At the [Tom Tom Founders Festival] we listened to the needs of the tech industry and what keeps young people here. I also have kids that won't move here because they say they won't live anywhere that they can't ride their bike to work or school. Those are the people that we want to come and stay. So we need to improve our quality of life. We also need to do this because one of our needs is to keep our rural areas rural. We want to protect our natural resources, we want to maintain the quality of life of the people for the people who are living in the rural areas. If we make our urban areas more livable and attractive for people then we can some of the pressure off of the rural areas from development.

8. Business leaders and social service agencies have told the Albemarle Board of Supervisors that new investments are sorely needed in the area of early childhood education. Will you make pre-K education and quality childcare a priority and if so how?

Yes I will. Investing in our children is the most important investment we can make. All the studies point to early childhood education as extremely important for the success of children later on.

As far as what I would do specifically, I think we have a great number of people in this community with expertise in this area and our school administration is already on projects to expand those efforts. I would want to talk with them to see what the best choices are and what their needs for funding are and go from there.

9. How would you describe the challenges and opportunities facing Albemarle County's rural farms, fields, and forests?

Well the traditional pressures that we hear are growth, development, and impacts on water resources and air. But the people in the rural areas have a number of challenges also. In some areas they have limited cell phone service, limited Internet service, many people are telling me they are concerned about their emergency services when I go door-to-door and talk to people. They are also concerned about keeping their small schools in their area. So there is a whole list of things.

If I had to narrow it down to the environmental aspects of the challenges, I think that we have to find ways to keep our rural areas rural while still helping people to make a living on their land and not putting too many burdens on them. It's a very hard balance to draw, to make, but we have to continue to work hard on that and review our ordinances on a regular basis to make sure we are not hindering people too much, but also make sure we are not causing problems with our water and air quality.

10. Describe a part of local government that would benefit from increased city and county cooperation and that you would make a priority.

Oh my, there are many areas. One of the things I really like is the thought of having a group of individuals that are good at placemaking to look at the areas where our city and county meet to improve the quality of those spaces with more green spaces, more greenways, to attract people to those areas, and make transportation easier in those areas.

I also, having been involved in the water and sewer for many years, would see the benefits of a combined water authority. We have three here in this community—the Rivanna Water & Sewer Authority, the Albemarle County Service Authority, and the city. There are a lot of efficiencies to be had there if we could combine those authorities and we could work on our water and sewer infrastructure challenges together.