



2011 Charlottesville City Council Candidate Interview September 2011

Candidate: Bob Fenwick (I)

On November 8, 2011, voters in the City of Charlottesville go to the polls to elect their representatives to three seats on Charlottesville City Council. This recording is Brian Wheeler's September 22, 2011 interview with Bob Fenwick (I). Other candidates in this race include: Scott Bandy (I), Brandon Collins (I), Kathleen M. Galvin (D), Satyendra Huja (D), Dede Smith (D), and Andrew Williams (I).

*The audio of this interview is available online in the
Charlottesville Tomorrow News Center*

http://cvilletomorrow.typepad.com/charlottesville_tomorrow_/2011/10/fenwick.html

Complete election coverage is available on the Charlottesville Tomorrow website

<http://www.cvilletomorrow.org/elections>

INTERVIEW

Mr. Fenwick, 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 and The Daily Progress. 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 and community design.

As you are aware, candidates been provided in advance only the general topics for these questions. All City Council 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 City Council?

In the worst recession in our country's history, Charlottesville is poised to borrow massive amounts of money for capital expenditures. Capital expenditures are for permanent structures, buildings, dams, bridges and so on, as opposed to salaries. The taxpayers which are fee payers, one and the same, have to pay back this. At the very least, the new city council should be able to oversee the management, track the costs, scrutinize any and all cost overruns of which there will be many for the increase in sewer capacity and a new sewage pumping station. Probably \$40 million. A new dam, reservoir, pumps and a new pipeline probably over \$140 million. A new bridge next to the pavilion in Belmont, probably \$30 million and the repair and replacement of our existing sewer pipes which by itself will be more than the other three combined, probably over \$300 million, so that is over \$500 million the citizens of Charlottesville have to pay back plus interest and fees on our bonds.

First, the bond is borrowed money. We are proud of our AAA bond rating but the only reason you borrow money is when you don't have any money. Second, several of these items we don't need right now. The dam, reservoir, and the pipeline at and to Ragged Mountain, the Belmont Bridge which can be repaired, not to mention financing a new botanical garden at a YMCA in McIntire Park and the city's portion of the Meadow Creek Parkway. If the citizens decide to proceed with these projects in the face of the recession, I believe my background and experience provides a unique opportunity to properly oversee the management and cost of these projects.

As a member of the Army Corps of Engineers having studied civil engineering undergraduate and graduate level at the G.W. University School of Engineering and passing the engineering training exam, and a Virginia Class A Licensed general construction contractor, I have dredged, I have built, designed and repaired bridges, managed construction projects, built and repaired roads, designed community water and sewer systems and would be very competent and comfortable overseeing these city projects and ensuring the citizens of Charlottesville are not fleeced.

2. What is your transportation agenda for the city? Does it require more money? How will you fund AND implement it?

Well, our community transportation is puzzling at best. Our political leaders say one thing: let's make the city pedestrian friendly, encourage mass transit, bike travel and so on, but their actions speak otherwise. We have bumper-to-bumper traffic into and out of town in all directions. North on Route 29 into Greene County, south on Route 29 past Red Hill, west on 250 to Crozet, east on 250 to Zion Crossroads, south on Route 20 to Scottsville, north on Route 20 into Orange County and east on Route 53 to Lake Monticello. What

direction have I left out? And the best road planning the city and county can offer is two huge bypasses/parkways directly into the urban ring. Who benefits from that?

And one candidate offers the plan to have a bike and pedestrian corridor running from UVa east to the downtown area. At the same time supporting a 4-lane highway running north/south crossing this bike and pedestrian corridor at right angles in the vicinity of the federal court on Vinegar Hill. What is the synergy between these two opposing proposals? We do not need another elaborate transportation plan. We need some common sense and some action.

First, our community needs true bypasses much further out that takes traffic around the city to be fed into smaller roads directly to the place of work or study. Our city does not need more and more auto traffic and congestion.

Second, our city needs to utilize the transportation assets we already have, namely buses—much better. Despite the recent claim that two million passengers used the buses last year we all have seen city buses circle the city all day virtually empty and we are already subsidizing this cost by 80%. Before we add more bus routes and/or buses, I propose filling our buses with more riders. How to do that? We have two examples right in front of us: the UVa bus system and the trolley and the common denominator is both are free. It is fair to say that very few people think of bus transportation as their first option. We can change that. The Charlottesville Area Transit or CAT has already begun to change that with their marketing and promotion and I applaud that, but it's the first step.

Let's take the second and most important step: make the buses free. We could move more people around the city more efficiently. We could increase the options of shoppers or diners or tourists to visit other areas of our city without the hassle of fumbling for correct change, not once but twice, once going and once coming back. Or circling the block looking for a parking space and riders could actually talk on their smart phones without endangering anyone. Easier, better for business and personal work around the city. Dare I say greener and smarter?

And, of course, this move wouldn't be free. Someone would have to pay and it would be all of us through taxes and fees but remember, we are already paying 80% of the costs for these empty buses. If we have the money for outside consultants and experts, we have the money for a more efficient transportation system. The alternative is to keep circling the city with empty buses and what sense does that make?

Third, open up the county's completed portion of the Meadow Creek Parkway for an entrance to the downtown area for pedestrians, bikes, and handicapped citizens. That part is there and in place. Let's use it.

3. How should the city, county and the University of Virginia work together to enhance our community's unique character and economic vitality??

I want to assume a big part of this question has to do with city/county relations and because if we don't work together, we're not going to prosper together, so the previous question described a revamping of our transportation system as greener and smarter, so now we come to stronger part. Our relations with the county and UVA couldn't be better at least from UVA's and the county's perspective. UVA, for the most part, stands apart from our community planning discussions and actions. Perhaps that's in a small way why they are truly a world-class university. Could you imagine what would happen if our city and county politicians were put in charge of the University? I'm just wondering.

The county is getting everything they want from the city: upgraded sewer capacity, the Meadow Creek Parkway Interceptor for the county's development of Stonefield across Route 29 from K-Mart and condominiums ringing the city. A four-lane cut-through highway from Route 29 to Route 64, the Meadow Creek Parkway, which takes out up to 22 acres of McIntire Park which the city Vision Statement describes as our urban forest. A huge new dam and pipeline project which benefits not the city but future county growth and which, again, results in a loss of a city natural area, the Ragged Mountain Natural Area. A massive increase in a sewer pumping station in a rebuilding city neighborhood, the Woolen Mills.

The county sees no benefit in cooperative actions because they know they have three sitting city councilors who will vote for county interests before city interests and if that sounds like an overstatement, remember the letter passed by a unanimous vote of the Albemarle County Board of Supervisors and signed by the chairwoman which was sent to the city on the compromise plan crafted by Dave Norris and it said basically we the county will not compromise, so is this a stronger plank that is advocated by one of the city councilors, one of the city council candidates. Who is muscling whom?

Finally, whenever I address a group of citizens, I have no idea who is a city resident or a county resident unless I am personally acquainted with them. It is not the citizens who are at odds, it is our political leaders who are at odds with their constituents.

4. What changes, if any, would you make to the city's Comprehensive Plan?

Well, right now we have plans coming out of our ears. What we need are fewer plans and more action. If we want a greener community, we should take action to make it so—dredging. If a city councilor says trees are important, then he can take actions that promote that—don't clear tens of thousands of trees in the Ragged Mountain Natural Area.

If we want less congestion in the city, we should make it so. Free bus transportation.

If we want a business-friendly city, we should make it so. Let realtors put their open house signs in medium strips of roads and spark some sales. I recognize plans are important but what good is a plan if it is mere words crafted only to garner votes.

5. Last month the Charlottesville Regional Chamber of Commerce reported that Charlottesville lost 3,248 jobs during the years 2000 to 2010. What specifically should city council do to promote employment?

Well, workforce development/jobs, I'd turn this wording around. Jobs come first. Any jobs, not just high level green jobs or white collar jobs. Any jobs. Our national and local economy is stuck in the trickle-down economic mode which leads to a boom and bust recurring cycle and the biggest developers justify this because they provide jobs and housing stock.

Well, how's that working out? Just look around and you can see the vacant buildings, residential and commercial, that are keeping real estate prices depressed. Or the number of real estate owners who owe more on their property than the market value. Personally, I'm tired of waiting for the trickle to get down to my level. I would advocate for a bubble-up theory in which every class of work is respected.

Our largest developers and real estate brokers are in trouble, not because they don't have enough businesses or houses to sell. They don't have enough customers to buy them.

In the past seven months, I have come across any number of men and women who wake in the middle of the night wondering when this economic malaise is going to end. There is much our city can do and we should get to it.

6. What is your top priority for action by City Council if you are elected?

Well, I've been through a few of these recessions and this is by far the worst. The worst one before this was the Carter-Reagan recession and it's going to take us a long time to work our way out of this so for the next few years, I would take care of the basic necessities for the city and fulfill our social safety net obligations and responsibilities. We are very fortunate to have the University of Virginia as an economic base for our community but this recession is eating businesses and devastating families and the city council has to recognize that words alone will not be helpful. We need action.

There's a ton of political fat in the budget that can be trimmed. Streamline the real estate assessment and appeals process and give a clear explanation of why assessments keep going up in the face of a declining real estate market.

7. What would you improve with respect to the city's parks and recreational facilities?

Well, for a couple of years now I've been advocating to save McIntire Park. It is a jewel that businesses and families enjoy, people of all ages. When we tried to recruit businesses, we take them by McIntire Park so they can see what their employees have to look forward to, whether it's the picnic shelters or the adult softball, both men and women, the Little League t-ball and just Little League baseball and the fast-pitch softball for the young girls. I think they go as young as six years old and it's a delight to see these little kids playing, so for the last couple of years, my advocacy has been to save McIntire Park. We can integrate the trail system to include the parks, McIntire among them, and the gardens at Rock Hill which is right down from MAACA which is off Park Street. A group of volunteers opened up Rock Hill gardens and the gardens themselves are across the Route 250 Bypass from the Rescue Squad at no cost to the city. This could be one of our park system's crown jewels right behind McIntire Park, a jewel with stone-lined terraces, plantings of original American Chestnut trees, cultivated area and wild areas, which are home to deer, fox and many smaller animals.

8. Are you planning to seek a new vote by the council on the previously approved 50-year water supply plan and how would you change the plan, if at all?

Yes, I would seek a new vote. It's pretty obvious at this point that the community water supply plan as pushed by the county and three city councilors is fatally flawed. Every justification it was based on has changed from the demand which has plummeted because of every-day conservation measures and which is now a trend to supply. We have much more water than we thought and we'll have much more when we dredge and just as an aside, the county alone has five reservoirs, the biggest of which—Beaver

Creek Reservoir—can hold over a billion gallons of water. The design itself we all know last year changed overnight from a reinforced concrete dam to an earthen dam so it's obvious nothing is set in stone and dredging has been shown not only to pay for itself, but to be a revenue stream for many years but selling the top soil sediment and composted marine vegetation mix just as Lowe's sells it for \$12.00 a cubic foot bagged.

Dredging improves the water quality, the recreational uses of the Rivanna Reservoir, the surrounding property values and is another untouched jobs machine.

My priority would be to concentrate on dredging first and repairing the spillway at Ragged Mountain . If we need a dam, whether a new dam or the repair, the increase in height of the existing Ragged Mountain Dam, if we need that sometime in the future, so be it, but not now in the depths of a lingering recession that will take years to recover from.

9. Would you support switching from at-large seats to ward-based representation for elections to Charlottesville City Council? Why or why not?

Well, on ward-based elections, I think the best decisions our community makes are those in which all the citizens are involved and have an active hand in, not just given lip service in public input and I'll turn that around. We are making terrible decisions when we keep it in the hands of a few people in what used to be termed the smoke-filled rooms. Public input in our community is the least noticed part of the process in which decisions are made by special interests and then vetted in a public process, the end result of which has already been decided. For a community with the history that this city has to basically disenfranchise an entire group of citizens is unconscionable.

One of the basic explanations of our government is that all of us can count on honest and equal treatment. Unfortunately, it is obvious we haven't reached that point yet. The political monopoly which results in political slogans with no real action in this city is preventing us from reaching our potential. What's good for individuals in this city is good for everyone.

10. If the federal lawsuit opposing the construction of the grade-separated interchange for the Meadow Creek Parkway is unsuccessful, will you support completion of the parkway?

Well, I have opposed the Parkway for many years on a variety of reasons, transportation, costs, the process that was gone through in deciding to do this and in our system of government, we have three equal branches: the legislative, the executive and judicial and when we did not get what we

considered to be a fair hearing from the legislative or the executive side, we pushed the judicial side. Now that having been said, if this is decided by a court that we have no case, then I will not oppose it. I mean, we have a system of government that works well when it works and that would be my stance on that.

11. Should city council support moving the Rivanna Sewer Pump Station from its current location in Woolen Mills even if it will cost city and county ratepayers an additional \$15 million to \$18 million to do so?

Well, a couple of things to remember. First of all, these are consultant figures and personally, I don't have a whole lot of confidence in the consultant [cost estimates] that the RWSA puts out. Secondly, the citizens of Woolen Mills have been rebuilding their community for years. That was a very distressed community and a very distressed neighborhood in our community and they've done a remarkable job over there and that's with the existing sewer plant that has affected property values. Now, they have borne this burden for I believe 40 to 50 years. I think it's time for the county to step up and start bearing part of the burden as well and one of the options is to have it across the Rivanna River from where the existing station is down on the flood plain basically below the insurance company, All State. Is that right? It's not All State. It's State Farm. Thank you, Brian.

So, the cost of the swing of what's being planned over there, the location and the fact that the Woolen Mills neighborhood has borne this burden for many years, one other thing to consider is this repair or the increase is a 50-year repair. I mean, if we go ahead with it, this will do for 50 years so that figure should be prorated over that time to get a true cost to the neighborhood and I believe that neighborhood will recoup that amount and the city will recoup that amount just when you run it out 50 years, so I would look very carefully if I had to prioritize where the sewer pumping station would go, I would probably rate across the Rivanna as my first choice. Tunneling under the railroad bridge which is mentioned here as a second choice and I really would oppose increasing it where it stands right now because that's right smack in the middle of the [Riverview Park].

Bob Fenwick, thank you for participating in this interview with Charlottesville Tomorrow.

All right, Brian. Thanks for keeping me up to snuff on my insurance company here.