



2013 Charlottesville City Council Candidate Interview

Candidate: Kristin Szakos (D)

On November 5, 2013, voters in the City of Charlottesville go to the polls to elect their representatives to two seats on the Charlottesville City Council. This recording is Brian Wheeler's September 16, 2013 interview with Kristin Szakos (D). Other candidates in this race include: Michael Farruggio (R); Bob Fenwick (D); and Buddy Weber (R).

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

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

INTERVIEW

Ms. Szakos, 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 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 the Charlottesville City Council.

I would look at that in two ways. One is personal experience and one is professional experience. I grew up in a mostly African American community in Mississippi, and then in Chicago as well, which I think gives me a perspective on some of the issues of race and culture that are helpful on this council. I studied for the ministry but ultimately got my graduate degree in journalism from Northwestern. I worked as a reporter and an editor. Being a journalist you have to really learn about complex topics and be able to bring it down to a place where you can communicate it clearly to the public, and I think that is a skill that is very helpful on council as well. I've had lots of practice in dealing with those big issues and figuring them out and knowing who to ask if I have questions.

The most political experience I've had was working on the Obama campaign in 2007 and 2008. I helped to coordinate a couple thousand volunteers and kept the operation running until staff was on the ground here, and I continued to operate the downtown office after that. Over the years, on a civic level, I've served as president of the Burnley-Moran PTO, the executive committee of the NAACP in Charlottesville, the vestry of Trinity Episcopal Church, and the special education advisory committee for the city schools, and I've been a grant writer for several local nonprofits which gave me a really good sense of some of the issues facing the community.

2. What is your top priority for action by the city council if you are elected?

When you're on council you can't have just one. I plan to continue working on a wide variety of things. It is a priority to me to be able to keep a lot of balls in the air at the same time so community engagement, city responsiveness, economic development, workforce housing, interconnected bike and pedestrian infrastructures, sustainable funding structures for the schools, health initiatives, improvement of access to opportunities for folks who may not have them.

But one area that really for me rises, that I really think we need to ramp up our attention [to]... is how we set up our children--especially children who are struggling with poverty and other barriers-- to thrive in school and in life. Kids are in the community more than they are in school and we need to use that time to make sure they are safe and healthy, engaged in learning and have access to enrichment activities, and that they know that we care about them, and we expect them to succeed.

I want to make sure that when children walk down the street in Charlottesville, when people ask them a question they're not asking about what kind of trouble they are about to get in, they are asking them where they're going to

go to college. I think kids want to do well and we need to make sure that that spark, that love of learning that we see in all the little kids stays kindled all the way through college.

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

I am particularly concerned, in the face of a 30 percent cut in funding from the state for public education in Charlottesville, combined with further cuts in federal funding because of the sequester especially in Title I programs and things that affect our most vulnerable students.

The schools over the past several years have cut about 50 positions, mostly administrative positions and some of those staff cuts were probably needed, and it's not necessarily a bad thing for a while but year after year of this is beginning to have a toll, and we live in a community that really values education. We've been patching this hemorrhage of funding with one-time funds from the city for the last three years, and I've supported that. But I think these band-aids are not something that are sustainable and we need to figure out how to adjust to this new normal and get reliable funding streams that the schools can count on. We've just appointed a Blue Ribbon Commission to look at this issue and I'm really hopeful that they will be able to come up with some good recommendations.

4. Earlier this year, the council enacted a stormwater utility fee that will go into effect in 2014 to replace and rehabilitate the city's stormwater pipes. Do you support this program? Why or why not?

I do support it. I actually think it is a big positive. We had a convergence of a bunch of different things that have happened in time that have all hit us at about the same time. We have infrastructure for our stormwater that is aging kind of at the same pace. We have stuff that was put in 1700s, gutters, tile pipes; we have things that were put in place in the 1900s and 1880s, and they all age out about now. We also have a big court order about what gets flowing into the bay, we have new EPA regulations that are coming down the pipe that are going to require the city to be spending 3 to 4 million dollars a year more than we are now. And that's a big deal. And it's not something we can just absorb into our current budget. So we had a couple of choices, and this actually came up several years ago when my friend Kendra Hamilton was on council, so it's gone back a while where it was urgent then and they realized there was not the public will to do anything about it yet so they pushed it a little bit down the road and its now come back to us.

But what the stormwater fee does is it says that if you have on your property permeable surface, which means surface that rain can't trickle down through, that you are part of the reason we need stormwater infrastructure. If it lands

on concrete and flows off it's going to flow downhill eventually into the creeks and eventually into the bay. If you have just woods on your property it trickles down on your property and doesn't go anywhere. So the idea of the stormwater fee is to assess property owners by how much permeable surface they have on their property. And that will gauge how much they pay in the stormwater fee. The other choice was to do it with property taxes and just raise on all property owners. The thing I prefer about the stormwater fee is that it actually encourages property owners to conserve. If they have less permeable surface they pay less fee. It is somewhat under their control. It also keeps from charging property owners a higher amount because this way we are spreading it out not only among people who pay property tax but also property owners who don't pay property tax – non profits, churches, theoretically other governments, anybody who would have property in the city system would be assessed this fee.

5. Does the city's department of Neighborhood Development Services have the funding, staffing and expertise necessary to implement council's vision for good urban design and placemaking?

Well, I think that is the big question now. We have a lot of ideas about ways we want to move forward. Some of the developers in town and some of the small area plans we are doing are bringing up these slightly grander and more unified visions of what we want in the city. I've talked with staff in the city and increasingly coming to the conclusion that to have somebody who is particularly well versed in urban design would be a good addition to staff. I think that folks who are there now do have design expertise but not always in urban design. Not that kind of global design and I think that would be a real help on staff. I think the time is depending on how much of a hurry you are in. Time is one of things you trade off for what you get done. If we are asking them to do a lot of new things obviously they need more people. If we can wait a little while for some things it can be fit in. I'm not sure I can answer the time question but I think an urban design professional on staff would be a good thing.

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

Well that question kind of begs the inverse, that is if property tax rates go down should we raise property taxes? Several years ago when property rates were going up, the city did lower property tax rates, and then of course in 2008 property values plummeted and we didn't raise them again. So they are still low. I think that if they go back up to the levels they were at, I think we are fine. Our property rate now is 95 cents. It was up to \$1.11 at the early part of the century. The 21st century. So I think that we have a bit of correction to do before we start talking about lowering property tax rates.

7. The Charlottesville City Council has provided the school division with one-time funds to balance recent budgets. What steps should the council take to help the school board build a more sustainable school budget?

The most important step that we need to take is to find a sustainable funding stream. We have now a percentage of new property tax revenue that goes to the school. And that worked well when property tax revenue was always growing. It doesn't work well in years like the past several years we've had when it is not. It also doesn't really make up for the fact that we have lost so much state and federal funding. We have right now a Blue Ribbon Commission that is looking at some possible solutions, so there are things in my head that would be possibilities but I'd really like to like to wait to see what they come up with. We've got some really smart people in that room and I'd like to see what they come up with.

But I think increased funding is definitely going to be needed, just because we've lost funding, and it's got to come from somewhere. Our city values its schools. Some people have talked about closing an elementary school and several years ago when that was floated to the public the response was overwhelming that people did not want bigger elementary schools. They didn't want their kids travelling further to an elementary school. They really like those small neighborhood schools, but they are expensive. So we have to look at what that costs us as a city. We have talked about the desirability of closing Walker and consolidating middle school at Buford, but that is going to cost money because we have to retrofit Buford to be able to fit those extra students, and we don't have the money. Whatever we do, even to save money, by closing either Walker or an elementary school, is going to cost money. So we need to figure out how to get that in a predictable and sustainable way for our schools.

In a broader context, I think we should also talk about the fact that, some consultant who came to speak to the school board several years ago talked about the fact that children by the time they turn 18 in America have spent more of their waking time out of school than in school. About 80 percent of their waking time out of school compared to the time they spend in school. When you talk about when they are little, on weekends, teacher work days, holidays, summer. I think we have to look at how our community supports education for children, so that kids are showing up at kindergarten ready to learn. So we are not spending extra money on remediation, we are actually spending money on education in the school. And building a community around children that supports that so the schools can get about their business of educating them.

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

The priority I would have is transit. But I think that is part of a broader communications issue that I think is important. We are actually talking now about proposing to the county that we have Council/Board of Supervisors meetings from time to time. We now have Council/School Board meetings together and it has really helped our ability to plan together. I think that sort of not crisis-oriented meeting would be helpful to help us work together better and understand some of the issues and perspectives that we have that we may not really understand now. There are a couple of different things, this year we did a lot of planning together, through a big grant for planning. And I think that has helped both the staffs and the communities understand how some our planning effects the other. We notice that most of our traffic choke points in the city happen where we touch the county. Free Bridge, 29, the places where traffic is bad is where there is big development on the County side and it hasn't taken into consideration the narrow street that comes into the city. Or vice-versa where there is a development on the City side that doesn't take into account what is on the other side. So we need to be planning together, I think that we also need to be bringing the University into those conversations, so it is not just county city; it is county-city-university. As the University looks to build its student body and move housing off grounds, we have to see how that affects our own planning and residential patterns and housing costs and parking issues and neighborhoods and rents, and all the different things those involve. Planning together is a good thing.

A couple of years ago we had a series of meetings with the County Board of Supervisors and staff about possible consolidation or collaboration in fire services, social services, and education. And those were things we really felt strongly we could do well if we were to at least cooperate on certain things. We found very little interest at that point from the County side, so there is not a whole lot we can do at this point. But I'm hoping as we get to work together better and know each other better we might find some places that they would be interested in working together. But the one programmatic thing that is a priority for me right now is transit. We have a wonderful example of cooperation collaboration between the city and the county on the number 11 bus, which is a brand new bus route; it goes from downtown up Rio Road out to Fashion Square mall and the county is paying 60 percent, and we are paying 40 percent. We are about half and half. They have all these new housing developments up there along Rio Road that now have transit which is wonderful. We now have a way to get our residents to jobs and shopping at the mall, we have a way to get our students to [the Charlottesville Albemarle Technical Education Center], because it stops at CATEC. And that bus, which now runs once an hour is running with standing room only. So it is hugely popular, and I am advocating for a second bus every hour, especially during peak periods of the day, and we'd have to get the county to agree to that, to

help fund that. But I think there are other places where we could really use that sort of collaboration, certainly the Pantops area, maybe even out to Crozet; maybe a bus rapid transit up 29, to the airport. There are a lot of potential ways that we could collaborate on transit that I think we are both eager to do, but it's a matter of how we do it and who funds it, and how you do that on the ground.

9. Private developers and the University of Virginia are currently implementing a City Council vision of a more densely developed West Main Street that dates back to the early 2000's. Do you support this vision? Why or why not?

I do support the vision of targeted density. If we want to support viable transit, if we want to support affordable housing, if we want to really protect the surrounding rural environment by having more dense urban development rather than two acre lots all over the countryside, we need to have planned targeted development within the city.

The one concern I have on West Main is that the vision for West Main wasn't just to have a lot of student housing along West Main. It was really looking at more of a mixed-use businesses and mixed-income housing, with more of a community feel to it and a business feel to it. So the two projects that have sprung up at the western end of West Main Street are pretty much students housing. Graduate student, student housing. They are not limited to that; I think other people could live there, but the way it is designed is definitely geared towards students. And I can see why. The market would certainly bear that, students want to live there. But it's not exactly what the vision was about. So as we look at developing the rest of West Main Street I want to make sure that we balance that, and don't have it just be an extension of dorms up towards downtown.

I think some of the neighborhoods on both sides of West Main Street, across the tracks behind the hospital, and over on the other side in the Tenth and Page neighborhood have had a lot of impact from lack of development there. A lot of the rents have been driven up because students are renting in those neighborhoods. People subdivide the houses into apartments which makes parking a problem, people from the surrounding University offices and the hospital are parking in those neighborhoods so people have a hard time parking in front of their houses. There have been noise issues for the neighborhoods there. So I want to make sure the development we have along West Main incorporates the needs of that surrounding community, and makes it part of the city and not just a tunnel of development.

10. What specifically should the city council do to promote employment and what type of jobs will be your priority?

We just this past year tasked a group of mostly staff to look at that very question, to use their expertise of and their experience from social services, human services, economic development, neighborhood development services, all the different people who touch employment and development in one way or another, to study and do a data analysis of what kind of jobs we have, what kind of jobs we might need, what kind of workforce we have available, who is employed, who is unemployed, what sorts of jobs they are working in, and what recommendations they would offer.

One of the interesting facts that they uncovered was that with 40 percent of the jobs in Charlottesville, you don't need a college degree, which is interesting, but that most of the people in those jobs have a college degree, which means the people who don't have a college degree, are having a really hard time finding work locally. If you live in the city and want to work in the city and want to make more than minimum wage, especially, it's really tough. And so we need to build those entry-level jobs, but we also need to build more jobs for those college educated folks who are just looking for anything at that point and taking those jobs.

So I am a big advocate for supporting tech start-ups, and some of the entrepreneurial biotech and more professional level jobs that are a growing industry here and something where you have to reach a critical mass for them to be successful. They borrow from each other, they use each other's technology, they share employees sometimes and research and one may produce equipment that another one uses. So the idea of having a hub for biotech and technology businesses is something that is achievable for us and those are decent wage jobs often with a career ladder. But in order to get that to happen, I'm intrigued with the idea of a public-private partnership to have a Wet Lab incubator space, and frankly I'm not really clear about what a Wet Lab is but I know that you need it for biotech and it's expensive, and it's often something that is out of reach for somebody who is just entering the business. So I would certainly hope that the folks who are in the existing businesses would participate in that; maybe UVa; and some funders as well as city funding and economic development to see what that industry needs that we can be a part of meeting.

I have also heard the need for whether it is industrial kitchen space or incubator space for some of the smaller micro-enterprises, that are coming out of organizations such as the CIC – the Community Investment Collaborative—that works with folks often who are low income and starting a business from scratch. Those are the folks who are most likely to hire their neighbors. It's an economic development model-- kind of trickle up instead of trickle down--that I think has a lot of potential for growing the economy in

sectors of our community that have had high unemployment and had a real difficulty keeping and holding jobs in this community.

The other recommendation that they made was to look at some of the barriers of employment. It is not just about creating jobs. There is a lot of talk about work force development and training people for jobs, and we can't stop doing that, but we are doing a lot of that now. One of the things that we realized and discovered through this study was that there are a lot of people who have the training for the available jobs, they have the skills they need, they want to work, they are able bodies, the jobs exist; but they either get the job and have to quit, or can't get the job, and its often because of things like child care. If you don't have child care, you can't work. If you are working a night shift and there are no child care slots available after six, you are stuck. You have to pay somebody privately which may cost you more than you are going to earn. Transit is another issue. If there is no night bus then it's hard to get a night shift job. If the bus takes too long to get to where you are going or doesn't arrive at a time that is helpful for your starting time, it may be that you won't take that job or you can't hold that job or you will continue to miss that job. Health is also an issue for folks sometimes if they don't have access to health insurance, if they are having health problems, they miss work they lose their job. So we have to look not only at jobs and training but also the personal barriers that get in peoples ways in working and try to figure out how we can move people from chronic unemployment to employment that is sustainable. Most people who are unemployed in the city want to work, and for one reason or another haven't been able to do that. Of course, most people who are unemployed are unemployed for short periods of time and we just have to make sure that we have jobs for them. But there is this core group of folks that need a little more than that.