



2013 Albemarle Board of Supervisors Candidate Interview

Candidate: Rodney Thomas (R)

On November 5, 2013, voters in the Rio Magisterial District go to the polls to elect their representative on the Albemarle County Board of Supervisors. This recording is Brian Wheeler's September 24, 2013 interview with Rodney Thomas (R). Thomas' opponent is Brad Sheffield (D).

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

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

INTERVIEW

Mr. Thomas, 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'll start by saying that in 1998 I was appointed to the Albemarle County Planning Commission and I spent eight years working with the commission. We put a lot of good things together. The cell tower policy manual was a big job. We put the neighborhood model together which was very, very interesting getting to a conclusion on that.

I completed the Virginia Certified Planning Commissioners program through Virginia Tech. While on the commission I served on CHART, MPO-Tech, PACC-Tech, Eastern [Planning] Initiative committee and numerous other committees.

I am currently a member of the Albemarle County Board of Supervisors in my fourth year representing the Rio District.

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

There's a lot of them. Probably the economy and taxes are at the top of my list, but I have another one that could be right in there with it, that's of course a clean environment, clean water. I'm kind of a fanatic over clean water and clean streams in the area. I have worked with the Rivanna River Basin Commission. I guess I am still a commissioner if they stay intact. Those two [issues] are probably co-leaders with me.

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

I would imagine that whoever hears this knows my stance on the Western Bypass. There's no question I support the Western Bypass which I am calling an internal road now. It has no inter-connections, no way you can make it operable to get people into the city. It's a straight through route, but I think it's going to be beneficial to the numbers of cars that come off of the business district coming down [Route] 29.

I think it will improve the [U.S. 250/29] bypass intersection where we are getting ready to put another lane on up onto the 250/29 bypass.

I supported the bypass when I was running in 2009. It was in all of my printed material. I've always been a supporter of transportation improvements because transportation has just been talked about and nothing has been done with it. I think this is the time for us to grab that bull by the horns and make sure that we are planning transportation improvements, not only the internal road / bypass, but others. On the MPO, our Long Range

Transportation Plan mentions a few things. U.S. 250 East is really a disaster, it's a gridlock. There's no real easy fix because if you try and do an Eastern Connector you put the traffic back on 250, you're just defeating the purpose. That's a biggie. We've also talked about widening [Interstate] 64 to one more lane East and West from Shadwell to the [U.S. Route] 29 intersection with 64. We've talked about widening 250/29 bypass from Barracks Road to 64, that's a heavily travelled road that really gets jammed in. Those are a few of the things we are trying to plan on the MPO and I'm trying to help plan it.

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?

After serving almost four years on the board, there's been a lot of interests that I've had. Of course the spending is the most important [area] that I think about. I think downsizing most everything at this point is what we need to do. We've had money, and we've spent money. I would rather see us do something with our infrastructure and things like that -- fire and rescue and police.

A very important part of what I worry about is the [Capital Improvement Program]. We are beginning to get some money into it, but we didn't have any money to put into it. We were way down. We didn't have any money at all in it. So we were just doing repairs and maintenance. I'd like to see us get back to the point that we actually can do some infrastructure changes and have money for the CIP.

WHEELER: You mentioned "downsizing," is that in other parts of the budget?

We've downsized, we've taken \$30 million out of the budget and we've cut the spending a lot. We haven't let any employees go per se, we've moved them around. Attrition has taken care of itself. I think we've done well. That 'we' means also the Albemarle County staff. The board, the decisions we made to go in a direction of economic vitality, and try to speed up the application process for developing and contractors, it has speeded up, because time is money. I think we have done a good job, but I would like to pat the staff on the back. We could have not done what we have done without the cooperation and eagerness of the staff to help this thing along.

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?

That's a question that I don't know the answer to. I don't know if it's too high or not. The only thing that I can say that I would want to put forth is that the proffers are increasing [the costs of] your house, my house, and everybody else's property when they come in to buy. Is that what we want to do? It's

probably a way to get cash into the coffers. I don't know if it's too high or too low. I know it is increasing the cost of property though.

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

Of course right off the top of my head I want to say yes, because when the revenue went down, well by law the county has to take care of its finances. It has been raised when we needed more money in the coffer. I would say probably yes, or cut the spending. Again, spending is a problem. If we've got money, we spend it.

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?

Well Albemarle Place, which is now Stonefield, started out as the model, it really did. It's kind of deviated quite a bit off of that now that it has been built, but it's still a good example of the neighborhood model.

We thought Hollymead [Town Center] was going to be good for [the model], we really did, but in my opinion it really hasn't developed out yet. That's a fairly good example, except the front parking lots are off kilter with what the neighborhood model would like, but you don't have to put all 12 steps of the neighborhood model into a development. It is suggested these are the steps that you can use.

WHEELER: The follow-up question was, "What improvements could be made to our community's placemaking efforts?"

That's a real broad question. Are you speaking of where the developments would go?

WHEELER: As the neighborhood model talks about its goals, are there things we could do to improve Albemarle County's efforts to create places like that?

I think that our planning department, and probably the board, and [planning] commissioners, need to push the neighborhood model. It is a good model. I think it's really good as a matter of fact. It gives people the opportunity to live in, I don't want to call it a pod, but in an area that is smaller. I believe we were working with a circle a mile across, a hypothetical circle, where you could walk to your grocery store, your dry cleaners, without getting in your car to take it five miles to shop. I think it just needs to be pushed a little bit more and suggested more than it has been.

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?

Automatically I am going to say yes because programs like Bright Stars are just fantastic. I know from your experiences being on the school board, you saw that when these children went to these early programs, how they did excel when they got into the public school system.

I would like to increase it a lot because it does help the children. In today's world, I really hate to say this, but the pre-K education is sort of a babysitter for the parents. I don't want it to be that. I would rather say that it is to the benefit of the children, not to the benefit of the mother and father having to work. While a lot of that is true, it sure benefits the children when they get to kindergarten age.

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

I think one of the biggest challenges for the farmers is the [Total Maximum Daily Load for the Chesapeake Bay] that we are looking at right now. We are having to look at all of our stormwater drainage systems and we're trying to put things together to get points with EPA since they put this forth. Farmers are losing prime property because they are having to buffer [waterways]. I am not against it, but I think it is hurting the farmers a lot. The farmers are the ones that really foster and keep our open space in Albemarle County, but the stormwater that goes into the rivers and the streams, especially from animals, is detrimental to the ecology, and it just damages them badly. It's a Catch-22, are you going to hurt the farmers or are you going to save the environment.

The forests – there's a lot of challenge there. When people come in and do a development they clear cut the entire property. Then they put trees back on but they are sparse, they are not as thick as the others, and it takes 30 years for the forest or tree to get large enough to be beneficial. I'd like to see more trees left because it helps the environment and ecology to clean the water before it goes back into the streams. As a matter of fact, the buffers that the farmers are having to put in. I don't think it's demanded, but there is a strong suggestion to plant trees and plants in that 100 foot buffer to filter that water better going back into the stream .

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

There's probably three. Schools is one, police, and fire-rescue protection. Those would benefit both sides of the border. I was on one of the committees

that [Delegate] David Toscano helped us get together, and you were part of that too [as a school board member]. I just happened to get stuck on fire-rescue. We tried, and everything we looked at, it just wasn't affordable to merge the fire companies and the rescue squads together. I think [consolidation] a little bit at a time, rather than trying to jam it all in together, I think if we could continue to go a little bit at a time, we will get there. We have three police departments. UVA will always have theirs, but maybe the other two could merge. It would save a lot of money for the city and county. But then again you have a city and a county, you have rural and you have only five percent of our acreage in the county is in the development zone and is urban, or getting really urbanized right now. The other [95 percent] is all rural except for little parts—Rivanna Village, Crozet, and [the area] north of the South Fork of the Rivanna River. The growth area should stay the size that it is until we can fill it up.