



2015 Charlottesville City Council Candidate Interview

Candidate: Anson Parker (R)

On November 3, 2015, voters in the City of Charlottesville go to the polls to elect their representatives to three seats on the Charlottesville City Council. This recording is Brian Wheeler's August 20, 2015 interview with Anson Parker (R). Other candidates in this race include: Scott Bandy (I); Wes Bellamy (D); incumbent Kathy Galvin (D); and Mike Signer (D).

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

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

INTERVIEW

Mr. Parker, thank you for participating in this interview with Charlottesville Tomorrow. The complete audio recording 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, the first two questions you will be asked have been provided in advance, for the others you have been provided only the topic in advance. 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. QUALIFICATIONS: Please describe your past experience that qualifies you to be on Charlottesville City Council?

I grew up in this region and spent 19 years specifically in Charlottesville. I grew up in Lexington, Virginia. And in the time I've been here, I've lived in I think seven different neighborhoods. I've worked in the service industry, I've worked in construction, I've worked in research, and I'm presently a web developer so I've had a lot of broad experience.

I think the No. 1 thing I've learned in construction is that when you try to hire someone, you are hopefully getting someone who wants to put themselves out of a job and that's something I'm bringing to the table with City Council. If elected, I would work really hard to not be there again and I think there's an opportunity to do that in Charlottesville using technology effectively.

Also, I do have a lot of experience building stuff, building roads, building underground utilities. I spent three years doing that kind of work so I have a lot of real hands-on experience actually building the system that keeps the city running.

And I've been a web developer for almost 18 years professionally running a small business, and so I am already working to build technologies working with City Hall to automate transparency for the City of Charlottesville. Again, I think that's an opportunity to really put politicians out of a job, and I think that's something everybody should be excited about it.

2. PRIORITIES: What is your top priority for action by the City Council if you are elected?

Absolutely 100 percent transparency. I believe that every request that comes into City Hall should be available online. One of the things that you realize when you look at the City Council agenda for meetings is that the ideas that come into city hall go through legal review, they go through environmental review, and they go through planning review. And that's all very much a black box, it really is. But that's really where the main decisions are made because those are highly qualified people who are reviewing the work. I'm working on a bathroom right now and I'm talking to Tom Elliott and they know what they're talking about and what you look at what happens in City Council, it's a lot of bobble-heading. Really, the tough decisions were made by the professionals who reviewed the work to be done and so what I hope to bring is this procedural transparency so that people can understand how things happen in the city and, you know, if you fail. Say, I'm working on a bathroom, right, and somebody looks at my plans and they say 'that's not good enough.' Well that failure should be transparent so that someone else trying to build another bathroom will have the opportunity to look at how I tried to do things to make improvements.

Similarly with small business. If you apply for a change of zoning, really at the end of the day you mostly just see the yes or no but you don't see the process of how that took place so there's a lot of wasted time. People just redoing the same steps and

making the same mistakes because they can't learn from other people. And that's one of the costs associated with a black box system.

3. BUDGET / BLUE RIBBON COMMISSION FOR SCHOOL FUNDING: What steps should Council and the School Board take to help build a more sustainable school budget?

One of the things that's going on right now over at UVa is that they're trying to attract STEM women, science, technology, engineering, math, and they're having a hard time keeping these highly-qualified technical women employed. The number one concern for a lot of these women is a good education and an affordable education for their kids. And if they live out in the county, having a place for their kids go to school that isn't an extra 40 minutes on their day. I think if UVa really wants to attract the kind of women that it says it wants to attract, I think they should reach out to the school systems and... One of the things they address in the Blue Ribbon Commission is that city schools only charges I think \$1,100 for the first student where Albemarle charges \$4,400 or something like that.

I think UVa should be looking at making up that difference if it really wants to attract the kind of women it says it does.

4. EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: Business leaders and social service agencies have told local government 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?

Absolutely. I grew up in Lexington. We had an outstanding education system, right? I think from 1975 to 1996 we actually had zero drop-outs. Rates that were like one hundred percent graduation, right? Like, actually no child left behind kind of stuff. So, absolutely. We need to have pre-K and I think again, this is one of those places where I think we should be leaning on UVa. They keep saying they have this huge commitment to attracting STEM women and I don't see them really putting their money where their mouth is. I think we should be leveraging that very seriously.

5. CITIZEN INPUT: Each growth area in Albemarle County has a community advisory committee appointed by the board of supervisors which provides input on program and policy decisions including the implementation of the Comprehensive Plan. In what ways would you like to see city government engage neighborhoods to ensure a diversity of voices is involved in the implementation of the city's small area plans?

This can get kind of complex. The baseline is that we can reach probably about 90 percent of the population through their phones. I mean, the number of people using smart phones is astonishing. One of the cool things about doing transparency correctly is that you can then put it into classrooms. I think if you're 16 and you're informed, you should have a say in what's going on in this community. You probably know a lot more than somebody who just moved here. That's just how it is.

One of the other things that you can do is look at how things have been gerrymandered over the years. Even in Charlottesville, we have gerrymandering, right? That's how things work. People break up the pie to suit their needs at the time. One of the advantages of that is that you can do polling and really look at where people are living and say well, if you're living in Tenth & Page, you know, that's pretty cool that you're actually forming and making a strong opinion because you've been neglected sufficiently over the years and you're kind of used to nodding your head and going 'well, it's not going to work out for me anyhow.' So, I think there's an opportunity there to use some of the districting that's been done to get a better block consensus.

Another thing to look at is proxy voting and this is something that's really taking off in Argentina, in Russia, among these really disenfranchised communities is that they will say 'well, I'm not an expert,' and they'll go to a region and they'll get everybody registered online. And people within those communities will say 'well, you know, so-and-so down the street really does know education and whatever they go with, that's what I'm going to go with.' And so they get a weighted vote that way in this proxy-voting system. I think implementing something like that would be incredibly exciting, something where we go to each neighborhood and say 'well, we've got these goals. Who would you like to listen to? Whose voice would you like to hear speaking on the matter?' And it's a much more fluid model of organization and I think it aspires to lessen the kind of corruption that takes place when you elect officials for any length of real time.

6. CITY-COUNTY-UVA RELATIONS: Describe a part of local government that would benefit from increased cooperation by the city, county and / or the University of Virginia and that you would make a priority.

We've had a lot of real disastrous crimes in this region. That's something that we all know about. We had a serial rapist. We've had multiple serial rapists. We've had some really horrible stuff happen in a wonderful town. We should be able to fix that.

One of the things I've talked to Tim Longo about, and I think he feels strongly about, is coordinating video online and this is something we've talked about. We've looked at how you would create a wide area network of cameras. If you're in public, by definition, you have no right to sense privacy in public. I grew up in Lexington and we had no privacy anyway. There was no such thing. You know what I mean? You know, that just didn't exist.

But I really think in Charlottesville we just need to put our foot down and say no, if you're in public, you're safe. And it needs to be more than just the college area. You know, this should be Cherry Avenue. This should be Park Street. This should be Rugby Road. Seriously. Everybody has webcams. They're ubiquitous. The technology is affordable. I think we looked at ten dollars a month per camera. That is just stupidly cheap. We could have a thousand cameras running in this town and yeah, I think we would put a real dent in violent crime.

7. PLACEMAKING: What role should City Council play in decisions about good urban design and placemaking?

Limited. You know, I think the Landmark is the Landmark. I think the Flats is flat-lining. I think that what we're seeing from City Council is a real, it just seems incredibly disconnected from what average people want. So I'm very skeptical about the role of City Council in mandating much of everything. This is one place where I think citizen polling should be really focused on.

That said, I would like to think that we could facilitate that. I think City Council's role in that case should just be to facilitate the discussion, but to really leave as much of that decision-making to the people who it will impact most strongly. City Council, very few of them, have had real working class jobs, you know? So a lot of these impacts aren't things that they're used to even thinking about.

8. TRANSPORTATION: What is your top transportation priority and how will it be funded?

When I moved here, riding a bike was fun. It was awesome. You could ride a bike and it was great. And that really stopped being the case about ten years ago. It's terrifying to get on a bicycle in Charlottesville. You just have to be, you have to really be gung-ho about it. And I've been hit a couple of times, I mean, everybody's who's been riding a bike in Charlottesville has been hit at some point, or will get hit. You just will. Welcome to Charlottesville. I think we need to do something, really need to do something about it.

We say we like green transportation. It's a good game to talk. I don't see it happening. I think we should really limit UVA students driving in town. I think, you know, if you're 18 and you need a car, that's just not true. You don't. I don't know. Now in Lexington, Washington & Lee student couldn't have cars for the first two years. Just couldn't have them. I think we should go with that, I really do. I think that we should limit the number of cars on the streets and try to make it a little safer. I've been hit walking down the street.

How do we fund that? Well, we could partially fund it by not paying our City Council. That would be a great place to start. I think that personally people should run from politics, not for it. But, here I am running, so I don't know where that leaves me.

9. COMPREHENSIVE PLAN: What areas of the current Comprehensive Plan will you concentrate on for implementation, improvement and/ or monitoring?

I think that every aspect of the Comprehensive Plan will be improved by transparency. I think that making every action that City Hall makes FOIAble is a really obvious thing. And I think that there's a little bit of skepticism perhaps that people are going to really find fault with city hall. And I think that's really unlikely. They do a great job. I know a lot of those people personally. They're hard-working. I think what you're going to find is that we get a good deal out of our city hall and our city staff. I think they're not just affordable, they're kind of on the cheap side actually.

But at the same time, we haven't even caught up with Albemarle County in terms of technology. They have an online system that has an API, that has, that you can do a fair amount of data-mining in, and we just don't have that, and no matter what we do, we need to make sure that our process is transparent.

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

Well, it won't be making more hoteliers you know, I think what we really need...

There are some great businesses in town. Let's talk about this. I mean, OESH Shoes with Casey Kerrigan. Here's a woman who's just brilliant, and I don't say that often but she really is. And she's in-sourcing just incredible types of work so she's got employees that she's training in machining, running a water jet. These are really powerful tools that allow for an incredible amount of innovation. And she has taken shoe design to 11. But what that means is that she has trained a lot of people in all these types of machinery, and now they're like viable employees who can a living.

Gaston & Wyatt. I worked there for a while and those guys make a living. I mean, as a skilled laborer they make a good living. And they have skills. You look at Design Electric. They have skills. These are people who come to the town and provide value upon value. They provide to the community, but then in their personal lives, they have value. You know what I mean? And I'm not saying that like working at a restaurant, that's a great industry also but there's a lot to be said for trying to bring in some small industry into Charlottesville and I think it's totally missing. We haven't done enough to attract it. Part of that is that it's our process for attracting businesses is kind of wonky. We still have a lot of PDF forms that you got to fill out online. If you want to make changes you have to go through kind of a black box process.

I think we should look at some of these businesses, like Relay Foods, some of these web development companies. WillowTree. We should be looking at them and asking them what we can do to help them and improve their process for growth. Because they're paying people. You don't have to go WillowTree Apps and ask if they're paying a living wage. That's not happening.

So when they started adding these extra hotels, we're creating jobs. You're creating lousy jobs. Like, do you want to go and change bedsheets then? No you don't. Like, is that a skill that's going to like, '20 years ago I was changing bedsheets and now I'm changing bedsheets and pillows.' That's not a career. We shouldn't be building jobs. We should be building careers.

11. PUBLIC HOUSING: Do you support the redevelopment of Charlottesville's public housing sites to create vibrant mixed income and mixed use neighborhoods without displacement of existing residents?

I want to go one step further. Yes, I also am really excited about some of the stuff that [the U.S. Department of Urban Housing] is doing nationally. And this happens to

be a real conservative plank. People ask why I run as a Republican and I say that this is actually the main reason. Because the only plank in the Charlottesville conservative party is that we work to give the people who are living in federal housing their homes. It reduces government. It reduces overhead cost. It increases pride in the neighborhood, lowers neighborhood criminal recidivism and this has been shown time and again.

I have an inside track to HUD right now. My sister is the deputy director. So I was on the phone with her yesterday talking about how do we fix the housing problem? What can we do to improve the housing situation in Charlottesville?

And here again, it sounds like I'm beating a horse here, but I'm not. It's that we don't have good transparency and as a result of not having good transparency, when we go to HUD, they don't know how to talk to us. Having a nice feeling or having a strong opinion doesn't matter a whole lot if you don't have a nice Excel spreadsheet with all of your data. And if you can't go to HUD with clean data, they can't help you. They can't help you give these homes back to the people who live in them. Obviously giving someone a home who has been on subsidized housing for years, that's going to take a transition phase, right? I mean, you're going to need money for that. You don't just hand someone keys to the car and say 'good luck, man!' You train them. You provide a buffer so that it doesn't fail. But that's something we should all be really excited about.

And again, it's something that if we can implement here in Charlottesville, we actually have the opportunity to scale that. Transparency scales well, actually. So if we do a good job of improving our understanding of how we're doing the process now, we will be helping out the entire country. That's like the real Think Globally, Act Locally mantra. We have an opportunity to put that in action. And that's incredibly exciting. I look forward to working with any of the groups who are interested in talking about that. I'm doing all this work. I'm doing a lot of work *pro bono*. I'm not taking donations. I'd like to make that clear. I don't want anybody's money. If you want to help me with any work, drop me a line, but I really don't want your money. I think we need to deal with that on a separate no.

And I hear criticism that 'if we give somebody a house, what if they destroy it?' And I tell people, you know, looking at the numbers, 90 percent of the time you've improved somebody's life and you've saved a ton of money. And with the money you've saved? That ten percent of the people who are going to destroy things? You can cover that. You can fix that. That's not going to be outlandish. Use some of that money to fund some of other things we want to do in town. There's an incredible amount of resources in Charlottesville.

So, just to follow-up on that. Are you suggesting that the homes that are currently public housing, that once redevelopment happens, they become owners of their own homes and there isn't public housing?

As much as possible, that we give them their homes. Sell it to them for a dollar. I think that's the traditional model. Yeah. That we actually give them their homes, and

they have an equity stake in the community. You look at what's going on in the education, you know? When a kid grows up and they live in some place that everybody knows is, they're on welfare. It sets them off on the wrong foot and it's not right. You got to fix that. Kids should be going to school and be proud of where they live. And if you don't, you're going to have problems down the road. That's just real. That's how that works. So if we care about our kids, we really need to look out for them from the get-go and make sure they grow up in housing that they're proud of.