



## **2015 Charlottesville City Council Candidate Interview**

*Candidate: Mike Signer (D)*

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 28, 2015 interview with Mike Signer (D). Other candidates in this race include: Scott Bandy (I); Wes Bellamy (D); incumbent Kathy Galvin (D); and Anson Parker (R).

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

[http://www.cvilletomorrow.org/topics/city\\_elections/](http://www.cvilletomorrow.org/topics/city_elections/)

### **INTERVIEW**

**Mr. Signer, 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?**

First of all, I want to thank Charlottesville Tomorrow for the opportunity to do this and the service you provide to the community.

I first of all grew up in Virginia and I'm a graduate of Virginia public schools. That's one qualification I think will help me on the City Council. And those schools were majority-minority so that's an important part of my upbringing and values.

I am a practicing attorney and a graduate of the University of Virginia. One of my first jobs out of college was working as a legislative aide to then-Delegate Creigh Deeds so I have familiarity with how the General Assembly works. I later worked as counsel to Mark Warner when he was Governor so I have further experience in how that office works in Virginia, especially vis-à-vis localities. I later served as senior strategist to Tom Perriello who represented Charlottesville in Congress.

So those are several different levels of experience, but I also probably have the most valuable experience at the local level here in Charlottesville. I run a small business, a law firm called Madison Law and Strategy Group that works with local start-ups and I'm outside general counsel to small businesses here. I was the chairman of the Democratic coordinated City Council race in 2013, so I came to know a great deal about both the policy and the politics around City Council in the city.

I'm the president of the Fifeville Neighborhood Association which is where I live. I'm the chairman of the Emergency Food Network here in town which provides a vital service for our most needy families in Charlottesville and Albemarle and I've also been a voting rights attorney for over a decade helping many people in Virginia and this region make sure that they have the right to vote.

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

The overarching reason that I ran for City Council was the theme of my campaign and it's something that will be a touchstone of mine on Council which was "One Charlottesville." That idea to me is about building bridges between the different neighborhoods and different communities and different groups in our city and really putting wherever possible the common good of the city foremost when I make decisions, when I try to talk to other stakeholders and leaders in the community.

That meant to me four areas, four priorities.

The first one is increasing economic opportunity in the city. The second one is increasing quality of life, particularly in our neighborhoods and particularly with the natural environment in Charlottesville. The third one was making sure that our public safety policies are really cutting edge. And the fourth one was standing by our public schools, which are our biggest budgetary commitment. So I'm really going to trying to drive on four priorities, four fronts, on Council.

But I would have to say, setting all of those aside, a very specific priority is to come to a resolution on the Landmark Hotel which is right in my front yard and it's also in the front yard of where I work. My business is on South Street and I think that it's just a shame that it has lingered on so long and I think we're approaching a real opportunity where we can come to a resolution in the first year after I'm on Council. I hope.

**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?**

I have reviewed the Blue Ribbon Commission report which is a very valuable and important document with some very bright people who care deeply about this commitment in our budget. And our public schools, again, they're the biggest item in the Charlottesville budget so the challenge of funding them sustainably is, as many people know, a long-term one. The schools, the state's contribution to the school budget locally dropped by some measures about a third and that happened to localities around Virginia. It looks like it may be increased somewhat, hopefully, under the present governor. That's some recent news. But we still have to do work to come up with a sustainable solution.

One of the recommendations of the commission that was [implemented] was a small increase in the meals tax. It's still very controversial. There were some other components that were not touched the last time around. They include looking at our property tax assessments and looking at a lodging tax. Everything ought to be on the table that's reasonable and that's evidence-based and that was examined by this Blue Ribbon Commission.

The budgetary process is very complicated as everyone knows, and you want an empathetic, smart approach to it. The one thing that was not examined by the Blue Ribbon Commission was efficiencies and they said that it was extremely important to look at. They just didn't have the bandwidth to do it. So I think it's important that we put into place a process and I'm having conversations with people right now maybe about a Blue Ribbon Commission on efficiencies that would be similarly constructed with experts in our community that could take an even-handed approach towards where are there savings that would not hurt our schools but maybe even would help them and that would have the support of the kind of leaders that are on a Blue Ribbon Commission. So I think we need to look at both sides of the ledger at expenses and at savings.

**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?**

Yes. I will make it a priority. I think that the evidence is in about how absolutely crucial those first years are in the development, particularly of low-income and more

vulnerable kids. Particularly those who may not have the most stable home environments. So education programs, ranging from motor skills to having their vocabulary increased to being read to, to being cared for. They provide just such an important leg up.

So, I think that Charlottesville Tomorrow has done really good work in the community on this. You all have done some interesting reports about innovative programs around Virginia and also around the country. There was something about social impact bonds you did about ways of funding these programs because it can be a slightly different income stream because you have Head Start monies, there's non-profit monies. It's off of the traditional K-12 brief of a standard school board.

So I want to be heavily involved in this. I want to be active on it, working with my other Councilors, working with leaders in the community. We have amazing resources in Charlottesville. We have the Curry School of Education. We have a lot of private sector folks here who might be willing to support greater childhood education. We have nonprofits. And it is something I'm going to support.

**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?**

I was very interested to see this question which I just saw for the first time because I'm going to bring an unusual experience set as the head of a neighborhood association and at our most recent meeting there was a very vigorous discussion about some development decisions and as a result of that a committee of citizens in Fifeville developed, and we're having our first meeting next week, about doing a small area plan on Cherry Avenue. There were about ten people who seem so far interested, there will probably be more, in working with the city and with Neighborhood Development Services and planning and economic development on providing a vision of what Cherry Avenue could be that would reflect what residents there want. What kind of retail, what kind of residential, what kind of nature, what kind of feel to the streets. So, I can't speak to what the result of it is going to be but it's on-going.

In general I think this really has to do with NDS, neighborhood development services. We have a new director coming in so there's a whole new page being turned there which is really interesting. There's staff. A lot of the rubber hitting the road is with neighbors' interaction with particular staff members at NDS. One idea that I've had is that we should have a transparent tracking system where any request that goes into NDS is assigned a number and it can be tracked. The fancy \$5 vocabulary word would be 'longitudinally' so you could track it over time. You could see which staff member has worked on that request, where it ended up. Right now we don't have that and I think that all measures that increase responsiveness,

transparency when neighborhoods are dealing with the city will be to the good for both city staff and the neighborhoods so everybody knows what's happening.

**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.**

Economic development. So, regionalism almost always is better than different localities operating in isolation. That's been the experience across the country and across Virginia. Generally when you have neighboring localities work together on something that affects both of them, it improves results. You could apply that logic to environmental decisions which cross boundaries to education to planning to transportation, so it's a big question.

I'm interested in economic development because significant employers that could come to town are likely going to benefit both Charlottesville and Albemarle. We are hand-in-glove. We've very tight neighbors. We should be cooperating and we should be collaborating. Most people, a lot of people in this region, cross that boundary multiple times in a given week and that's part of the nature of our community.

So when we're looking at employers who could bring good, significant numbers of jobs to this region, they are likely to contribute to both Charlottesville and Albemarle and I think that we'll be better off talking a lot more strategizing together, trying to figure out how to add as much leverage from both communities to that potential employer that could come in, and at least not being surprised by what the other party is doing.

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

In my campaign I talked a lot about the model that I see City Council playing in the way that our government is designed. And maybe this is my experience as a corporate attorney, but I see City Council as like the board of directors for the city. It's a part-time position with policy-making and vision-setting. That's its charter. You have a full-time government. You have a CEO effectively in the city manager. That's how that's set up.

So I see City Council as setting the vision for the city. So in that essence, it's extremely important for placemaking, especially when it's got more power and more authority under the code of Virginia than the planning commission. City Council does ultimately effect the planning vision for the city and even more important than that, planning and placemaking decisions a lot of the time have a very long runway so a lot of the decisions now that are happening on West Main Street are the result of zoning code decisions that were made ten years ago. So when I read the Comprehensive Plan recently it talks extensively about how we haven't really had a comprehensive code update for the city's code. Zoning codes are so... I'm trying to think of the right word. They're nerdy and they're difficult and it's a little bit obscure for regular people to understand but they are vastly important, folks, to get the stuff

right. Especially because people are making ten-year long decisions to put together the financing and the plans for new buildings. I think it's very important. City Council's job is to both take in the best ideas from the community and from experts and from the neighborhoods and from stakeholders but also to lead on these placemaking decisions. What kind of city do we want in ten, 25, 50 years? What do we want it to feel like? So I see it as very important.

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

Well, I'm going to divide this into two, actually. I think that No. 1 is that we need to continue to make sure that our transportation decisions decrease our reliance on individual automobiles and increase a variety of other kinds of transportation from bikes to public transit. That's good for the city and it's good reducing congestion and it's good for getting people on the street and interacting with each other. It's good for a healthy street feel in the city.

The second part of this is that I think we need to make sure that our transportation policies help low-income people. There are horrifying stories in the city of people who are stringing together two or three part-time jobs who don't have cars. What they have to do to get from where they live in whatever region of the city to their two part-time jobs is harrowing to think about and they have to do it every day. So you have hour-long commutes in our ten-square-mile city. Sometimes going into the county.

So I think we need to be very attentive to the challenges faced by those folks and it may be that there are very creative innovation-driven ideas. I was joking at one of the earlier campaign events that it might sound futuristic and I don't want to be... you know, we're on the record here, but I just would urge people to think about how there could be real developments that the so-called driverless car movement is going to bring to cities like Charlottesville. You're seeing this around the country.

In Virginia, Governor McAuliffe is trying to put Virginia ahead of the curve on driverless cars. If you work out the regulatory and the insurance issues, you know, think about what it's like when you've taken an airport shuttle and the shuttle picks up 12 people before it goes to the airport and you have a rough time about when you're going to be picked up. That process could be made vastly more efficient, maybe for low-income people so you would actually be able to get to where you need to go in a fraction of the amount of time and with less expense to the locality. Who knows? It does sound futuristic, I recognize. I don't mean to be... I want to be careful with the ideas that I'm exploring but there may be creative innovations out there that really could help crack a problem that's been very difficult to help so far, which is how do you use big huge buses where a lot of capacity is wasted to help someone who doesn't have a car get to where they want to go.

## **And did you want to address the funding challenge?**

Thank you for asking the follow-up. I look at funding challenges for transportation like I look at every funding challenge for every request in the city. We have to balance it against all others. Transportation funding is a valid, valuable part of our public policy but I don't want to make individual commitments to individual budget requests.

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

I spoke about one already which is to continue to make sure that the zoning code is complete and shapes the community we want to have over the generations. But there was one other specific area that I talked about in my campaign. We were there this weekend. The Rivanna River really is this jewel within our borders and there could be more that we could do to make it a so-called eco-tourism destination where people are using it much more actively and tubing on it and rafting on it and where improvements are developed, probably mostly with private sector and non-profit partners, to continue to make it a real heart of our community in a planned way. So you would be looking a generation down and people in 25 years would say 'wow, that's really a reason that I love being in Charlottesville. I love using that river and I love going there' in a way that doesn't happen as much now. So I think that's one part of the plan that I think would be worth paying attention to.

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

I think the most urgent part of our economic opportunity menu is jobs for people without college degrees in the city. We have a persistent economic challenge in this city which is those folks who had trouble in high school and definitely with college. It can be a real difficult trap to get out of. However, if we could bring in significant blocks of jobs for those folks and possibly link them up with a training program that could be offered at [the Charlottesville-Albemarle Technical Education Center] or [Piedmont Virginia Community College].

And this is one of the things that I'm very eager to do on Council is to negotiate these kinds of deals competitively with employers who are eyeing our locality but also eyeing other ones. So if we could bring in an employer, hypothetically, imagine a call center or quality testing software. These are ideas that have been presented to me and they could create, you know, in the high dozens or hundreds of jobs for those kinds of folks here in our community. Good jobs with benefits. You'd need a little bit of training. Don't need a college degree. I think that would be a great victory. And that can only happen working with our great economic development office and with a lot of others. I think one of the things I can do is try and bring private-sector experience and some negotiating skill and leadership to that kind of goal. It will take a while.

**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?**

Well, I support the redevelopment of our public housing sites. The experience from around the country, and I have family members who have been involved with this in other cities, is that redevelopment works best when it's done with two things. Maximum buy-in from the community, and this is what we've learned with the various mistakes with Vinegar Hill which continues to kind of haunt us. So, maximum buy-in from the community and then the second thing is phasing. The question is a little bit misleading because displacement is a very charged word. I think you don't want anyone to feel displaced. The whole goal of redevelopment would be to not have that word be part of the picture. So, as you know, the city is looking toward a very successful redevelopment that happened in Alexandria, Virginia for models possibly for advisory services right now. So we want to look to the best and most successful programs that have happened around Virginia and around the country to make sure we don't ever get to that place.