



2009 Charlottesville City Council Candidate Interview September 2009

Candidate: Bob Fenwick (I)

On November 3, 2009, 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 9, 2009 interview with Bob Fenwick (I). Mr. Fenwick is being challenged by Paul Long (I), Dave Norris (D), Kristin Szakos (D), and Andrew Williams (I-Write In).

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

http://cvilletomorrow.typepad.com/charlottesville_tomorrow_/2009/10/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 on the Internet. Information from this interview will be used in the compilation of Charlottesville Tomorrow's non-partisan voter guide. 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 related to land use, transportation 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. Are you ready to start?

Yes I am.

1. Please describe your past experience that qualifies you to be on City Council?

Well when I was young, I served as an officer in the United States Army Corps of Engineers for almost 7 years. I had a tour in Vietnam. In Vietnam, I commanded a combat engineer company of up to 180 men and that was for seven months. I was attached to an infantry brigade which was in an infantry division. I was honorably discharged and started a construction company soon thereafter as a general contractor in the state of Virginia.

For 33 years I have run the business and know very well the importance of budgeting, customer satisfaction, and the synergies between local and state governments and private enterprise.

I have been the Vice President of a cancer research corporation and the video about breast cancer, which my wife Victoria and I made, can be seen by following the links on VoteBob.net. For 6 years I produced, wrote, directed and hosted a television home improvement series along the lines of This Old House. The series was titled Home Work with Bob Fenwick and it featured a local house renovation on Avon Street. It ran on PBS and PAX.

I have written several books, among them the first children's book written exclusively for the Internet, Santa's Little Helper and that also can be found on the net following at <http://www.Santas-Little-Helper.com>. Most recently besides continuing my construction activities I have been involved in activities to save McIntire Park.

2. Do you support the formation of a Regional Transit Authority with Albemarle County? What are your regional transportation priorities and how do you recommend we fund them in the absence of new state funding and without the ability to raise a local sales tax?

At this time, I do not support the formation of a Regional Transit Authority. There is much to do before we get to that step. The City of Charlottesville has a fleet of buses running virtually empty as they circle the City all day. Before any grand schemes are taken with the transportation system my priority would be to fill up the buses. Except for UVA football games and the trolley, which is free, I've never seen more than 7 people on one bus and that was during rush hour.

The smartest move the City Council ever took for transportation was to tint the windows on the buses so taxpayers wouldn't know how few people ride the bus. The City recently released a statistic that claimed 2 million people rode the bus last year. I asked where have these 2 million people been hiding? Do they wait until midnight before piling on the buses? To reach that

figure every man, woman and child in Charlottesville would have to ride the bus for 47 days. Do the math. We don't need more money for transportation.

The City has plenty of money to do whatever they want. We don't need more bureaucratic layers. We need smaller buses. And we need more common sense from politicians. The whole point of buses and mass transit is a lessening of vehicular traffic.

The day the Meadowcreek Parkway opens for business, Charlottesville will lose 20 years of efforts to control congestion. The City Comprehensive Plan calls for promoting mass transit, pedestrian travel and bicycling—these kinds of things. In the face of this the City Council votes to approve the Meadowcreek Parkway which will bring 24,000 vehicles a day right into the heart of Charlottesville. In a manner of speaking, the City is making up for the lack of a Western Bypass and an Eastern Connector and the price is more congestion and a large piece of McIntire Park. So my regional transportation priority would be: promote the use of mass transit, promote the use of busses.

3. In August 2009, Advocates for a Sustainable Albemarle Population (ASAP) released the first report in their research seeking to identify an optimal sustainable population for the community. Should City Council explore policies that would cap the City's population growth at a number below the potential build-out population? Why or why not?

Well in regards to Charlottesville, this may be a moot point at this time because Charlottesville is actually shrinking. We are losing people from the City. So, the City Council shouldn't explore policies that would cap population growth. It would be a waste of time to do so and energy spent on that would be better on infrastructure maintenance, budgetary reform, and transportation issues to name a few. If they did set a level for the population, what if that level were below what we have now? The obvious question is what happens then?

It is a profoundly disturbing thought to think of the City Council deciding who would stay and who would go. Would the rich be favored over the poor? The bright over the dull? College grads over high school grads? White collar over blue collar? Income tax payers over non income tax payers?

The day they did that level of population, the conversation would turn from "sustainability," which is a concept we are all coming to embrace, particularly as applied to the environment, and it would come to be defined in divisive terms and the discussion would not be productive.

4. Is neighboring Albemarle County's relative population growth, too much, too little or just the right amount? What in your mind are the advantages and disadvantages to population growth in Albemarle and the operations of the University of Virginia?

I'll answer that question, but first I'm going to answer a question with a question. That question is mainly, is primarily, a question for County residents. The County encourages the growth but has not put in place the infrastructure to support it.

It impacts the City particularly in transportation because the County has walked away from their road requirements (the Western Bypass, the Eastern Connector) and forces the City's hand on the Meadowcreek Parkway. The County designates Pantops as a high density area yet does nothing to provide for additional roadways to service this area. The Route 250 Bypass, running from lower Pantops to out east, routinely backs up in the morning as far back as Luck Stone quarry. The traffic light just over Free Bridge heading east on 250 takes 4 or 5 rotations in the afternoon to make a left turn onto Route 20.

Available transportation [money] in our area now is spent entirely, almost entirely, on Meadowcreek Parkway, an obsolete 50's idea designed to maximize downtown traffic while there is a bridge at Lower Pantops, Free Bridge over the Rivanna, that shakes when traffic passes over it to the point that cracks have appeared in the top wearing surface. Does it make transportation sense to waste money on a highway straight into the center of town while the necessary maintenance and repair of a major bridge goes undone?

So now I'll answer the question directly: the bottom line is the rate of growth is too much when the local government that promotes the growth will not also provide the needed improvements in infrastructure.

Now as far as the University of Virginia, we are very fortunate that we have the University of Virginia here. The University gives the City a stability that most cities lack. While the national unemployment figures approach 10% in this major recession, our figure is still below 6%. The University is playing a major national role in cancer research and other medical fields. Its business and law schools are among the best in the nation and its research facilities are growing in size and stature. And unlike other parts of the County, when the University expands it doesn't crowd the city as Pantops is doing. They move further out as in their Fontaine Avenue Research Park and the North 29 Research Park that's past the airport.

And one additional major plus about the University of Virginia is as we move from a manufacturing economy into service and what they call “green jobs,” the University is going to be a major leader in that. That will help promote growth not only in our City but in our community.

5. Should the community invest in repairing on enlarging the existing Lower Ragged Mountain Dam built around 1908 as part of the 50 year community water supply plan? Why or why not?

I say yes. The community should invest in repairing not only that dam but any and all capital projects that need it. In most cases the repair will basically be a catch up on routine maintenance that has been systematically neglected for a generation. Take the dams and reservoirs: none of them, Ragged Mountain, Rivanna, either of the Ragged Mountain [dams], has had any maintenance dredging since they were built. People that drive these road, especially over the reservoir, have they ever seen a dredging barge or a dredging suction system out there?

Before any enlargement of the dam takes place, these reservoirs should be cleaned up and as part of that clean up, which I call maintenance dredging, which should have been done all along, this reservoir can also be mapped which will enable the two communities to make a more informed decision in the future on the question of whether a new dam is needed or if we need to enlarge the existing Lower Ragged Mountain Dam. Another factor is if we do that, if we get to the work that we should have been doing, the maintenance dredging, we will lower the risk for any firms that come in here and do dredging work, and that will certainly lower the cost to the community.

6. If you could focus on one area for improved partnership with Albemarle County during the next two years what area would that be?

I think I'd say having the County accept us as we are. It's not the people of our community that cause a problem. I wouldn't be able to tell one group from another in any setting. It's the political leaders. Right now the County leaders are pretty much having their way with the City leaders. I would focus on ensuring that Albemarle County political leaders realize that Charlottesville and Albemarle are two different communities. Not just realize it, but act on it.

They have land to develop, we don't. They have much more open space than we do. Our politics are different from theirs. I say respect our differences. Don't try and bulldoze us on important decisions like the Meadowcreek Parkway and the dredging and damming issue and force taxpayers to commit to hundreds of millions of dollars in spending that might not be needed. It certainly is not needed at present. The County should realize that what's good for them, which is the Meadowcreek Parkway, is not necessarily good for us.

To the County leaders and some of the City Council members, McIntire Park is simply vacant land. To the citizens of both communities, McIntire Park is the hub of our social community and has been for generations. And I would help to encourage the County to realize that.

7. What are your priorities for economic development and workforce development in Charlottesville?

Well, “economic development” and “workforce development” are terms that planners and politicians use. Everyday people simply say “jobs.” There is not a job in this area that someone can't learn to do either through school, mentoring or on the job training. When I hired men and women in my construction contracting business it wasn't so much what they knew that mattered. It was their attitude, their willingness to work and learn while they worked, and showing up when they were supposed to that mattered most.

“Economic development” and “workforce development” focus on jobs and jobs depend on a pro-business attitude from city government. I believe a level playing field for all employers, no matter how many employees they have, even if the boss is the only employee in the business, is the best tonic for Charlottesville. If a large employer came into the city the planners and politicians would fall all over themselves to provide bonds, tax breaks, incentives, these kinds of things. If the City really had a pro-business attitude it would do the same for the small businesses. Several months ago I proposed a policy of no sales tax until 2010 for new businesses that occupied a vacant store front before September 1st. The city came up with half a dozen reasons why they couldn't do this, but they didn't offer an alternative plan. Several weeks ago the city had just this kind of “tax free” day to encourage business before schools opened. If it were a great idea once, it would be a great idea twice.

8. What would you like to see happen to the whole Martha Jefferson hospital site in Charlottesville?

For many years I renovated older buildings. My office and home is now in a 203 year old brick building started before Monticello was completed and actually built by the guy who built one of the last phases on Monticello. So I see great value in renovating older structures. The TV show that I mentioned earlier was about a 1918-1919 structure on Avon Street. This kind of renovation helps the community retain its character developed over many years.

I have been inside Martha Jefferson Hospital many times since I live a block away, and that's where I raised my family. It is a solid, well built structure. Perhaps a combination of offices on the lowest or lower floors with

condominiums on the upper floors would seem a good fit. Maybe even medical offices. But the most important piece of information is what do the residents in the neighborhood think? There is never a down side to being open and honest about what the city planners have in mind. And including the neighborhood in the process in a meaningful way is very important.

9. What is your vision for McIntire Park?

My vision for McIntire Park is exactly what Paul Goodloe McIntire insisted on when he made the generous contributions that resulted in McIntire Park. The land was given with conditions and the City accepted the conditions along with the land. It was given "in perpetuity, to the citizens of Charlottesville as a park and a playground." The City at that time didn't say they would accept the land but not the conditions.

Mr. McIntire was well aware of congestion and he had a remarkable appreciation for open space. His business world was the concrete canyons of Chicago and New York. Commercial development in the western part of McIntire Park with the YMCA, which I support and have done a lot of work to try and find a better location for, and in the eastern part with the Meadowcreek Parkway and now in the central part with the proposed botanical gardens with additional buildings and parking and imported non-native plants, was certainly not what he had envisioned. If he had envisioned such he would have said it, but his words were very simple and straightforward: "to be used as a park and a playground." It is now free and open and the entire community enjoys it and has enjoyed it for generations. I would work hard to keep it that way.

10. Do you support the Three Party Agreement reached in 1990 between Albemarle, Charlottesville and the University of Virginia which identified a sequence of transportation projects to be completed before the construction of a Western Bypass of U.S. Route 29?

I fully support and would work to retain fully cooperative agreements between the City, the County and The University of Virginia. We are, after all, one community. In the case just mentioned above, a Western Bypass was to be part of the deal. It is no longer. Now any agreement is open to renegotiation as circumstances change and there are very few challenges we face as a community that can't be solved cooperatively. In the case of roads and transportation, the population density has changed dramatically in 19 years. I don't think anybody foresaw the explosion of growth at upper and lower Pantops, or the major development at Old Trail, just to mention a few, or the bumper to bumper traffic up 29 North as far as the Greene County line. As the situation on the ground changes so must cooperative agreements. And I emphasize "cooperative."

11. Given the long funding and implementation period for multi-jurisdictional projects like the Meadowcreek Parkway and the community water supply plan, what are the advantages and disadvantages to the current City Council revisiting previous Council's decisions regarding such project?

I say there are always advantages when citizens make their opinions known. This is after all a representative republic. If a past City Council either through weak leadership or incorrect information made a mistake on any issue, I say it is entirely appropriate to revisit that decision, and if it were a mistake, correct the mistake. An elected official is under no obligation to ratify a bad decision. At least I wouldn't.

City Councilors have a basic responsibility to represent the City's interests, not the County's interests. The County has their own political representatives to do that. Another consideration in this discussion is what the people of a community want as represented through their elected leaders. Many times we speak of this as the will of the people. When a candidate makes a promise to vote a certain way, and then backs off on that promise once he is elected, a new Council has every responsibility to revisit any decision made on a broken promise.

12. Should Albemarle County officials be able to revisit or renegotiate their past decision on the 1982 revenue sharing agreement with the City Charlottesville? Why or why not?

I would repeat basically what I said before. Any decision should be reopened for negotiations if conditions on the ground change. And we've had in our community a history of being able to do that. So I don't think it would be a situation of one jurisdiction taking advantage of another. These negotiations typically would last over a year, sometimes maybe two years, I think the ones back in the 80's were two years from start to finish, so the public would have plenty of time to have input.

13. In June 2006 the City and County signed off on a 50 year water supply plan that includes a new dam at the Ragged Mountain Reservoir and a new pipeline connecting it to the South Fork Rivanna Reservoir. Do you support this plan, why or why not?

At this point, I do not support the plan. It's a good concept but I do not support it because damming has become the default position in this situation. We have neglected, as I've said many times, the infrastructure maintenance and in this question, that is dredging. Much of the discussion which prompts the dam, circles around silting or sediment in the Rivanna Reservoir. What we should do first, particularly in these economic times, is to dredge the Rivanna

Reservoir. It is very basic, it is something that should be done. It is a basic, mechanical operation that is done every day in this country. So my position at this time would be to dredge first. That will increase the capacity. As the demand for water goes down, we will see how that shakes out. In a number of years, not only when the economy improves and we're not operating with negative budgets, but we'll have a lot more information to then make a really good decision on whether we need a new dam.

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

Well I think my top priority would be to, in these conditions, is would have to be to try to increase jobs in the city. Many people recognize me now because my work on Save McIntire. But it is my feeling that the people always should come first. There are people sitting on benches on the Downtown Mall who are willing to work but cannot find work. There are empty storefronts on the Downtown Mall. There are empty storefronts across the City. I focus on the mall because I live about a block and a half from the mall and I walk it every night.

So my top priority would be to increase the infrastructure maintenance. That is probably, I would guess, 30-40 jobs right there that the City should be doing. And you start with something small, you build it and you put people to work. And then immediately, once we got out of this recession, I would turn my attention back to saving McIntire Park.

15. Do we have appropriate resources in City government to achieve the objectives in the City's strategic plan? In what way, if any, do we need to make changes? What impact will your recommendations have on staffing and the annual budget?

Well I think we do have appropriate resources. The City has plenty of money. Gary O'Connell just recently announced that he's found another \$500,000. If the City Council wants to do something, they will find the money to do it. Now on the flip side of that, on the east end of the Downtown Mall is a building sitting empty. That's the transit building. That's been sitting empty three of four years. So there are decisions City Council makes... it's almost like they think our money is Monopoly money and that's how they spend it.

They want to raise taxes. I say this is unnecessary. I say spend the tax money as if it's coming out of your own pocket. And that might make them hesitate just a bit. So no additional taxes. We have plenty of money. We just have to apply it in the right places.

One way you can do this is to make sure the department heads are well aware that the City wants to save money, and for a department head that

came in under budget, that would be included in his personnel file and it would make a difference when somebody came up for a raise or promotion, and it would just start a new way of thinking about spending money in the City.

As far as staff, this is not the time to be laying people off or firing people. So I would really not go for that. And I'd like to see the annual budget stay like it is. I'd like to see it lower, but that may not be possible given the circumstances. I would like to see the annual budget stay where it is.

16. What do you see as the primary responsibilities of City Council?

In a representative republic, the City Council does the work that they people don't have time to do. We raise all raise families, we have businesses, we write books, we start business—whatever we're doing, we are busy, day in, day out.

The City Council, the five members of the City Council, take it upon themselves, nobody appoints them, they run for office freely, to do the daily business of a city. They pay the bills. They hire the City Manager, and department heads. They appoint commissions to protect what the city has. So they do all the necessary work to keep the city running. And in addition to that, occasionally you will find a City Council that has good leadership that will give the city a vision. And not only give the city a vision, but follow through and make sure that's done.

Thank you very much.

Thanks Brian. Thanks Sean.