



2013 Charlottesville City Council Candidate Interview

Candidate: Michael Farruggio (R)

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 26, 2013 interview with Michael Farruggio (R). Other candidates in this race include: Bob Fenwick (D); Kristin Szakos (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

Mr. Farruggio, 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 like to think it all began being raised in a very diverse, first class, urban community. And that was Freeport, New York. New York is one of the finest planned places in our country. From that experience, I lived within a New York City diversity and I lived there for twenty years. I spent four years in the military, moving to another city in Florida and having that experience there and then I came back to New York and for four years I was an actual union worker both a laborer in construction and a police officer. New York City was considered and voted internationally as the finest police department in the world, so that was quite an experience working there.

In Charlottesville I have been a police officer here now for 25 years. There is no neighborhood I do not know, and no street I haven't ridden on numerous of times. I have spoken to thousands of citizens, visitors, students and business owners. I have over 31 years combined experience working for the government. I know so many of the involved parties personally in the city that on day one I am ready, willing, and able to work. I have also met and know so many of the players in the County and the University that gives me a leg up as well. Those experiences combined with four years on the planning commission, dealing with the whole development and redevelopment of the city, make me ready on day one to hit the street running.

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

I don't have a top priority, except managing the City the best and the most professionally that we can. I will work with Council on every issue that is before us. I realize that no councilor is a one man show, and a lone wolf would surely be alone and not get anything done. One priority that I have is the budget guidelines we give the city manager. Our process no longer can be to reach out and spend every dollar we can find, and plan the budget around that strategy. That's how we go to a sixty percent increase in our budget, and the second highest spending capita in the state of Virginia. And that is how Council managed to increase the cost of living for every resident without significant reserves.

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?

Well this is connected right to the question before. The way we conduct our city manager is key. The way the budget is prepared is a problem. For over ten years it has been pointed out. Right now the city manager is instructed to build the budget around last year's spending, plus what is anticipated to bring in next year. We never consider spending less. We need to be much wiser. If

you tell anyone to go out and spend every dollar, they will do it. I'm not looking to spend every dollar, but to spend that every dollar wisely. Again, this highlights how we have grown sixty percent in spending, and became the second highest per capita in government spending. That's Council's fault, and that's one of the highest priorities I would have.

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?

Well I fully support replacing and rehabilitating our stormwater and wastewater systems. But that is not really the question to ask. The question is why are we having to enact this tax, or fee? The problem is for decades council has neglected these critical infrastructure needs. What is worse, they have collected money specifically for these repairs, through the enterprise fund, and spent it on other items by moving its proceeds to the general fund. Last year we transferred 5.8 million dollars out, and then told the citizens we need to enact this tax to make up for the council created shortfall. That adds 44,000 dollars to the stormwater bill for Barracks Road Shopping Center. 2,000 dollars do a nonprofit on Cherry Avenue that we need in this community for support, and 8,000 dollars for one of the churches in the city. That is not a fair burden, I couldn't call it a fee- I end up calling it a tax, that is specifically increasing the cost of living for everybody in Charlottesville. Every who pays rent is going to get that, and it will be rounded up. Every time you go shopping, the shop that sells those items has to pay that tax; they are going to round up on their dollars. So this is doing the exact opposite of what we need to do for our citizens, and to bring business into the city by raising the cost of living here. And although I support what we need to do, I do not support that fee. With that said, I am not looking to take away that fee, I am looking to get on Council, work with the other councilors to figure out what's the best way to manage it.

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?

The more important part of this question pertains to Council's vision, and good urban design and placemaking. As a former member of the Planning Commission, I have often noticed the blight of neighborhoods not being taken fully into account when considering urban design. In fact, that is what brought me to lay government in the form of the neighborhood association. As long as I can remember, from prior to being the president of the Fry Springs neighborhood association, I asked why NDS was not NPS, standing for neighborhood protection services. There has never been an effective advocate for neighborhoods other than the neighborhood association, and they do not have the power to protect themselves. Neighborhoods are the

most critical aspect of our city. I would even say it is more important the business, because without the neighborhoods and the places where people want to live, you're not going to get the businesses. We saw that in a recent forum talking about high-tech, and bringing high-tech into the city. They want to be here because of the neighborhoods and because of the downtown. So we have to protect those assets. One of the simple examples I can give, is for 25 years I've been here, for 25 years I've heard City Council saying they want sidewalks, and for 25 years I've seen very little built. Now some will tell you oh no we have built sidewalks. But if you've lived, ran, bike-rided, walked, jogged, waked with a baby stroller, been in a wheelchair which unfortunately I was for two months, you'll find out, this is not a walking friendly city. In 25 years we could have gotten so much more done had we really wanted to do that. So NDS, whether it's NPS, it is critical to the protection of our neighborhoods.

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

The tax rate should be lowered, every time the estimated revenue is greater than inflation or one or two percent as prepared for what is going to happen with the next budget assessment. If the assessments on the housing has gone up, significantly, and you're preparing the budget and you can tell we're going to bring in a windfall, 3, 5, 7 million dollars extra that year, the tax rate should be lowered in that circumstance. Again this goes back to how we climbed up to the 60 percent greater spending and second highest per capita government spending. If those dollars perhaps, when we did have those things, I'm not saying that every single time we are going to be able to predict that, so when a big windfall did come in, and we have not raised artificially every single budget for the city, then that windfall could be rolled into something I mentioned before; sidewalks, or whatever other serious infrastructure improvements.

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?

Well I have two children in the city school system. They started out at Jackson-Via Elementary, where they could have walked to school but they were bused. They moved up to Walker and now in Buford, they both were active in sports, and in the music programs of the city school system. We love the city school system and we do have a great system that we need to advertise more and we need to get the successes out there. For so many people there's a perception that it is not a great school system, and it really truly is.

With that said, there's nothing in school system whatsoever that I'm looking to cut. Some folks have said, as a conservative, you're going to come in looking to cut. I don't want to cut any program or any money of the school funding. But what I think we can do is if we set the proper example, through the guidelines we use in creating our own budget that will roll over to the school system setting up their budget. They are going to have a more predictable city council and city budget, and their budgets are going to work better for them.

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

That's a great question. As a police officer for 25 years, when I first came down here in 1988 it was pretty interesting because when I came...my wife was in a deli in New York, talking to a gentleman whose son had just come down from New York to become a police officer in Charlottesville. She said, 'Well we're looking to move out of New York City,' he said 'Well look no more, go to Charlottesville, its God's country.'

So she went home, called the operator at that time, cause we didn't have all the internet connections et cetera, got transferred to Charlottesville, got in touch with the Police Department, they found out I was a New York City cop and they were looking to hire me, and the rest is history. Well I came down here looking for this cop that came from New York. How hard could he be to find in Charlottesville? A New York City cop who's got kids and is from New York.

Well I couldn't find him in the city of Charlottesville. In the time it took for me to get the job and come down here which was less than a year, he had moved back to New York and took his job back with the New York City Police Department. The culture shock was too much for him and he couldn't stay. Well interestingly, he didn't come to the city; he went to the county with the brand new police department that was started there.

And immediately, coming from what we had in New York, I [asked], why do we have two police departments, three departments actually, when there could be one police department saving a lot of money, and it would have given you more movement for those officers, it would have been a better department over all. Being a police officer for years you've seen that modeled in other cities. And I've often wondered that. Now, in the City and the County and the University now I think there are ways we can save money. There are things such as the police department, the fire department and parks and rec. So we should look for every opportunity, and then engage in those discussions to see what we can join forces on. When you've got duplication of the exact roles taking place across jurisdictional boundaries you have that opportunity. And our jurisdictional boundaries, even though they are there and they are real, we are really more like one community, and it would actually

tend to bring our whole community closer together had we shared more, and so I would support it.

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?

It is very interesting. The very first committee that I was put on when I started getting interested in government was back in 2000. And I was appointed to the Urban Design Committee, which was studying urban design features on the Downtown mall and West Main Street. The Torti Galas study had been done and we were talking about how we were going to implement at least one side of the street being a wide boulevard and what type of design features did we want that to have. So that was one of the very first items I worked on before I went to the planning commission.

I support a vision of diversity and smart growth in appropriate areas that's not going to be to the detriment of the neighborhood. We have corridors in the city that are prepared for that density. West Main Street is one of them, Preston Avenue is another. To a lesser degree Cherry Avenue is another. Fontaine Avenue and High Street are two others that will roll into it, and of course not to mention Emmet Street as well.

Now, West Main Street is a perfect place to get this started and as we see, here it is 13 almost 14 years later we are getting some stuff done. Student housing I would like to see stay west of the Amtrak Station. As well as mixed development on that whole corridor all the way to University. We can't exactly predict what is going to happen cause we have to let the free market do what it is going to do. But I do support it, we do need to be considering how we are going to have the zoning not impact the neighborhoods north and south of that. Westhaven, Tenth and Page, Fifeville, Starr Hill, need to be protected at all costs. As I said earlier, neighborhoods cannot be damaged because of what is going on. So they need to be taken into consideration. Smart growth I call it. So I do support that and I'm happy to see what is happening right now.

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

One thing we have to do, that I don't think we are good at right now, is we have to be more proactive in economic development, to finding out what the business community needs. I've been talking to a lot of people, even more intently in the last weeks than in the past years. High tech is probably one of the best jobs, I refer back to just last night we had the forum on that. High tech, medical tech and biotech has probably got the most bang for the buck for a city.

That's not to say we should turn a blind eye to other types of manufacturing and light industry that comes into town, but the fact of the matter is per square footage of floor space you are going to get the most out of these jobs. So that's what we should be angling to. The targeted markets report, the Orange Dot report, they all lend to this conclusion we are seeing.

Now, we need to start acting on that and one of the things I'm finding out is we are not taking the opinions of these businesses seriously enough. They have meet ups, quite regularly, where they're talking about what they need and what's going on. And when I ask, there is no city council, or city economic development office representatives there. Now I'm not faulting anybody for not being there. But now the word is on the street, and now we need to be there. If I'm on council, and we don't have anybody from the economic development office there, I'm going to go to these things. And that will be the voice of a councilor bringing this back to city council meetings saying this is what we need to do.

There are certain things we can do with zoning. On the planning commission for four years, people would come in and they would throw their hands up and say, 'Tell us what you want.' Well we need to tell them what we want. We need the office space that these start ups can get into, not stuck with a 3-5 lease, but a 2 year lease. We need to have an incubator like we have downtown, that's an incubator for twenty companies, not one or two.

Those are the things we need to do to start showing these people that we are serious, and another thing we need to do is we need to blow our horn. We need to tout ourselves, we need to say we are here, and this is what we have. We have an incredible city, I refer to it as the natural resources, like it's our own nation, an island nation that's got gold and platinum and fertile land to plant crops, all here in Charlottesville, but we are not tapping into it.

We don't want to go over there cause we don't want to dig a hole. And we don't want to walk across the grass, and all these obstacles we put in our way. What we need to do is get out of the markets way, blow our horn a little bit better about what we have and our quality of life in the city, and then start enhancing that quality of life even more, and it's going to grow up. I've learned about and heard about Aspen, Arlington, Austin, and all these comparisons that we make. Charlottesville has more than all of those things, and we've got a head start on it. We need to develop that. Because when the conversations are had ten years for now, they will not be trying to get three A's in a row with Aspen, Austin, and Arlington; they're going to be saying Charlottesville and then some city in North Carolina, and some city in South Carolina. But Charlottesville needs to be it. And we have the opportunity to do that now but we have to step up to the place, be proactive about it, and start going after it.