



2013 Albemarle Board of Supervisors Candidate Interview

Candidate: Diantha McKeel (I)

On November 5, 2013, voters in the Jack Jouett Magisterial District go to the polls to elect their representative on the Albemarle County Board of Supervisors. This recording is Brian Wheeler's September 27, 2013 interview with Diantha McKeel (I). McKeel's opponent is Phillip Seay (I).

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

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

INTERVIEW

Ms. McKeel, 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've had 16 years of service to Jack Jouett District residents as a four-time elected member of the Albemarle County School Board with oversight responsibilities for 26 schools, 13,000 students and an annual operating budget of \$155 million dollars. I've served two terms as board chairman, additionally I have served on the boards of the Piedmont Regional Education Program and the Charlottesville Albemarle Technical Education Center. I've also been a member of the school board-board of supervisors joint oversight committee for the county's \$80 million capital improvement plan.

I am a graduate of the Citizens' Police Academy and a member of the police anti-gang task force. I am a thirty-year employee of the region's largest employer, the University of Virginia, as a clinical research coordinator. I am an organizer and leader now for 17 years of a local adopt-a-highway team.

I grew up in a small business family. I led the school division to join and become an active member of the Chamber of Commerce. My service to the community includes several terms on the school board's legislative affairs committee developing proposals and recommendations on state legislation that impact education policy, practices and budgets. I am a former teacher who holds an LPN degree and a clinical research certification and a graduate of Bridgewater College with a major in education and sociology. I believe that body of work supports me very well for the position as a board of supervisors member.

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

My top priority is the health and prosperity of Albemarle County and its residents. A very general priority. I believe that begins with strong fundamentals that value safety, education, and government officials who seek out and represent the priorities and hopes of those who elect them.

These are core values of government that make it possible for businesses to succeed and grow, for the health and safety of the community to be protected, and for the quality of life to be elevated and maintained for all residents.

The county's police department is currently understaffed and needs more officers to serve our large geographic area and growing population. A high quality K-12 public education system, at maintenance levels only for years, needs the resources to maintain the global competitiveness of our students. An excellent school system is important to our community by supporting economic and workforce development, another one of my priorities. Schools

are critical lynch pins in maintaining and growing vibrant communities and support high quality of life for all citizens. Where schools fail, communities fail.

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

I am opposed to the design and location of the 29 bypass. Every impartial report, and the Virginia Department of Transportation's own report, concludes that the current configuration is not cost-effective, nor will it solve our traffic congestion.

At six miles long, it has taken 41 homes, that's about seven per mile, it runs through seven neighborhoods impacting almost a thousand homes, closely skirts six schools taking 12 acres of school property. At a cost of \$300 million and climbing, it is a road project that should be completely retired.

If the bypass is not built, we have to remove the targeted neighborhoods from under the 25-year threat. These neighborhoods have endured enough. Surrounding homes cannot be sold. Property values have been suppressed and government-owned homes are in various states of disrepair.

We need to align land use and transportation plans to serve our current situation. We should install the adaptive transportation system [for traffic signals] fix the Best Buy blockage and the 'hourglass blockage' on 29 north and build the parallel roads as planned. We know these actions are cost-effective and there is general agreement in the community that they will work. We need to maximize the infrastructure we have already paid for as well as improvements in other modes of transportation.

Regardless of your position on the bypass, there cannot be any more suspension of rules and forced midnight votes as occurred when the board of supervisors approved the project. The board of supervisors should work to regain the trust of all of our citizens in a leadership process that is open and respectful regardless of the outcome of an individual vote.

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?

I have been concerned about the low level of officer staffing per-capita in the county's police department for many years. There is a need to add at least 20 new police officers using the police department's conservative ratio of police officers per population density. We have a large geographic area with urban, suburban, and rural areas, and we must assure a safe environment for all of our citizens.

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?

Proffers have unintended consequences and I do not believe that growth pays entirely for growth, especially in the short term. That's why I believe we must support reasonable and smart economic development to take the pressure off property tax which is now the way county services are mostly supported.

At the same time, we have a real need in our community for workforce housing. It's conceivable that creative public-private partnerships—proffers—offer a solution. This is an area that is ripe for additional research and study that would include an analysis of best practices in Virginia and even around the country. It's an important public policy area where broad diversity of expertise can lead to solutions that solve and not create problems.

One approach I strongly favor is to utilize my Common Ground Council which includes business and community representatives to discuss how we can best address the need for affordable housing and how public-private partnerships—proffers—can be constructed to meet this vital community need.

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

I think that really depends on the individual year and I wouldn't be prepared to say in any given year I would do one thing or another. As we all know, the economy can drastically change, and revenues can change drastically. Having said that, I think it's really important to keep our property taxes low.

I think we have to make sure that they are low because we really need to support not only our rural land owners, but all of our residents. A healthy economy should have about a 35 percent [commercial] tax base. Albemarle County in a good year has somewhere around 20 percent. So that's why I am in favor of economic development to support county services. Economic development, the right kind of economic development, which would mean the type you see in Targeted Industry report: the biosciences; defense; technology; and advanced manufacturing technologies. And I am specifically talking about economic development in the growth area.

We could be number one in the state with the right support for those types of industries. We are now number three. The biosciences increased by 24 percent in Virginia over the last decade, actually growing at four times the rate of other jobs.

So I guess the answer to your question is I don't think it would be an automatic. I would consider it, but in any given year you have changing circumstances. I would work hard on economic development so that we had a stronger tax base and we weren't depending so much on our property taxes from year to year.

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?

You know it's funny, the two that I like best are not even completed yet. The ones that we see where the homes have been completed, very often the commercial or the walkable business areas have not been completed. I have to admit I like Stonefield. It's in my district and I know there have been some discussions around Stonefield. That's ok, I think that's healthy. But it's going to have stores, it has a grocery store, it has a hotel, some of the condos have already been built, but it will have townhouses as well that are going to be built. I think it can be very appealing, I think when it's finished it will be very appealing.

The other one that I really like, that isn't even that far along, is the new Out of Bounds development that's going in behind Canterbury Hills on Barracks Road. Vito Cetta is the developer and he has worked very closely with the neighborhoods that surround that development and has met numerous times with the neighbors. At their suggestion, he has made many changes in his plan to make it more friendly to the surrounding neighborhood. Now the interesting thing about that development is that they have pulled the commercial area out of that development because of the Barracks Road [Shopping Center]. [When you] have commercial so close to Barracks Road, when you have that walkable community just a few blocks away, it was appropriate.

I think as we go through this process of building these, and working through them with the developer, they offer a lot of potential for our community and they will get refined and be better and better as time goes by.

WHEELER: And the follow up there was are there are any improvements you think could be made to our community's placemaking efforts?

You know it's interesting. I support the neighborhood model very much. When you travel in Europe, what we all love about some of these European countries is that they all have the neighborhood model where you can walk to restaurants, and you can walk to services. We all seek that out when we travel so it's just a given that we should seek it out in our communities. I do think we don't do as good a job at establishing what you might call gathering places or community places. It was interesting at the [Tom Tom Founders

Festival] forum with the entrepreneurs on Tuesday evening, what we heard as elected officials or to-be elected officials very clearly was that they wanted places where they could just sit down and talk and gather and exchange ideas. While the Downtown Mall definitely offers some of that, I am not sure that we are allowing for that so much with our models throughout the county. I think it's something we ought to look at. I do think a good example of what we have done is with the Crozet Library where we have offered some of that space to the community. I think more parkland and open space would be great. It seems to me when we talk about placemaking efforts it goes back to those four things that we have discussed as a community before, the happiness drivers of aesthetics, openness, social offerings, and education. I would certainly look at those drivers as being very important.

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?

Absolutely I would make it a priority and I think this community has been hearing that a long time from the Chamber of Commerce. I think the Chamber has said it should be a priority in our community.

One of the reasons people lose jobs and have trouble finding jobs literally is childcare. They either don't have anyone to take care of their children that is affordable or close by, or they lose their job because their child is sick and they are off [from work]. This could help support our problem with workforce and getting people back into the job market. I think it's critical for the families and the children as well, certainly it supports education. I think it levels the playing field for a lot of children. So I would join the Chamber in their belief that this is something we ought to be looking at as a priority for our community--quality, quality programs.

Having said that, from the viewpoint of the schools, we probably don't have the space right now. So this would be a real opportunity for public private partnerships, for the business community, for the education community, for county government, and even for city government, perhaps an opportunity for all of us to work together a little bit more closely. Even the University is building a brand new daycare program right now off of Whitewood Road. So it may be a good opportunity for the three entities to get together and say in order to support our employees, whether they work at UVa, or the city or the county, and our families that live in all these areas, let's take a look and see how we can really improve our pre-K education and at the same time help all of the families in this community.

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

The rural areas in Albemarle County make up about 95 percent of our land, which I think is absolutely appropriate. The five percent that's left for the growth area is certainly adequate to hold us for a long time. People talk about that five percent being such a small percentage, but it's actually about three and a half times more than the [size] of the City of Charlottesville if you look at it that way.

When I drive out Garth Road or get onto [Route] 20, and some of the rural roads, it really is amazing and wonderful that they look the same as they did 20-25 years ago. Almost. There's a little change, but they are very rural. You still see pastureland, and fences, and a few more houses, but it is amazing how little they have changed over the years, and I think that's wonderful. It really is what makes our county special. And I think it is to a great degree part of the appeal that we have in Albemarle County.

At the same time, I know that landowners and farmers are struggling to keep their properties at times. I would certainly continue to support the Acquisition of Conservation Easements program, I think it is critical. I think it is critical to support land use tax. I think it is also important that the land use tax program has to be accountable and verifiable, but I think the county has instituted a process to do that. I think both of those programs are excellent programs to support our rural areas.

As an elected board of supervisors member, I think I would certainly want to get with some of the landowners and farmers in our area. I think my expertise on some of that is not as strong as it is in other areas. I would be very interested in hearing some of their concerns and talking to them in detail and seeing what we could do. But certainly I am very supportive of our farms and our forests. Our forests are critical for our air quality, the more trees you have the better your environment is. Even in the urban areas we ought to be planting more trees and establishing more parks.

The other thing that's really nice about our rural areas that people have to remember is that they don't require as many services. So they do help us keep down our taxes because we are not putting a lot of the infrastructure there and providing services in those areas.

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

I think there are a lot of areas because I think sometimes we haven't cooperated as much as I would like to see us cooperate. And I would add, I think you said city and county, and I would add UVa to that mix as well. I

think that right now the University of Virginia is reaching out to the community in ways that I haven't seen happen before. I think that's very welcome. And I think the time is right to pull UVA in to see what we can do for the three entities to be working together.

Most people don't even know where the city and the county lines are, and most people don't even realize that all the dormitories and a lot of the University of Virginia property is in the Jack Jouett District [in Albemarle]. So I have a real vested interest in this cooperation.

To get back to your question, I think one area that's ripe for cooperation is economic development. We ought to be looking, all three of us, because it all benefits our community. Certainly the University is going to be looking at hiring new faculty, because they have to increase their enrollment every year, so they are bringing in new students, and they have a lot of faculty that's going to be retiring. So jobs for faculty spouses will become very important for them. I think the city is looking at economic development. I'd like us to see if perhaps we can put economic development at the center of some of this cooperation.

I'd like to really talk very strongly about workforce housing. I think the city is doing some things that are very different from the county, and certainly the University struggles with a lot of employees who have issues trying to find housing. So workforce housing, economic development, fire and rescue is ripe for cooperation. I think the proposed shooting range that is now on the table for the UVA and the city and county is a great example of being a win-win for all three entities as well as the community. I'd like to see maybe more cooperation around natural disaster preparedness. I am not sure we have preparedness plans that involve enough all three of our communities.

The other thing I would like to look at is transit and bus. I am not sure why we have to have a University of Virginia bus system and the CAT system. There are models out there. Blacksburg has figured out how to have one bus system, where the Tech students, which is certainly as large a university as we have here, where the Tech students and the locals use the same bus system. Now we have a much larger land area, but I still think if we really wanted to we could reduce the number of buses on our urban ring roads, reduce our emissions, and save money in the long run by coming together. So those are a few of the areas I would like to look at.