



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

*Candidate: Wes Bellamy (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 September 1, 2015 interview with Wes Bellamy (D). Other candidates in this race include: Scott Bandy (I); Mike Signer (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. Bellamy, 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?**

Well, I think based on the ability that I have to be able to bring the city together in different ways I think qualifies me or makes me an individual who is in a unique position to lead within the city. And I know some individuals or some people may think that you need to know a great deal of policy, you need to know everything from zoning-based code to different comp plans and issues on West Main Street, you need to know all of that stuff. Those things are important, but I think in order for you to be able to be an effective leader, you need to be able to be an individual who can actually relate to the people and that's a quality and a trait that I have that I think separates me from others.

I also believe that I'm a team-builder. I'm a person that believes in community engagement, but also cohesiveness as a unit. So, Council, we're going to have to work, if elected, we're going to have to be able to work as one unit, move as one train, as opposed to five different trains on their own track. Let's get on the same track. Let's do different things, but we can do those different things but be on the same page as long as everyone is informed and know what's what. So that's kind of what I personally believe puts me in the unique position to be able to lead and I would also say that the relationships that I have throughout the city.

You know, when you lose an election by less than a handful of votes two years ago, and you're a 26-year old kind of brash kid who thinks you know everything about everything, you get humbled. You learn a lot not only about yourself, but the city. You learn what the city truly needs. You get an opportunity to meet a lot of different people and then you get to put all of that together to really become a refined and defined leader and I think this is where we are now. So, I'm looking forward to it.

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

Cohesiveness. I want us to be able to be on the same page and that's us and that's Council. I think before we can have any agenda, before we can have any initiative, before we say "I want to fix redevelopment, I want to fix the schools" or "I want to improve the schools" or "I want to repeal a tax," whatever anyone thinks they want to do, before you can do any of those things, Council has to be on the same page and I will look to be and I hope that I can be a conduit and a kind of a glue.

A person who can bring Council together so that we are on the same page, so that we have one focus. Strategically, we move and operate as one. And some people may agree with me, some people may not agree, and some people may want to hear specific platform issues, but those platform issues are for naught if you can't get along with your fellow Councilors. I don't want to have a Council in which people can watch on public access or they can read different clips and it's obvious that we don't get along. I don't want to be a part of that. That would be a complete contradiction of everything that I teach the kids every day. I always tell them you got to be a team player and that you have to try to work people and look to find the good

and get it done, and that's what we have to do on Council. So, that's priority and objective number one for me.

**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?**

Well, I think there's a few things that need to happen first and before I go into largely saying we need to X, Y, and Z, I would like to sit down with every school board member, kind of see their vision for where they want to go, and also talk to my fellow colleagues who will be on Council and, again, this is if elected because there's no shoe-in, there's no guarantee that anything's going to happen in November.

But if elected, as an educator and as a teacher, I think I bring a different perspective. I know the needs and the wants of not only students but teachers in the class room. Having a degree, a master's degree and working on a doctoral degree in education administration, I know kind of the fiscal practices and the things that are needed in order to run a school. What you may need from a central office perspective to make sure that your school is efficient, your school system and your school division is efficient. I know those things. That's a unique perspective that I will bring to Council. When we're talking about the things that the schools are asking for, or why is it that they always need money or why do they need this or why do they need that, I have a unique position and can say "this is why, because you need X, Y and Z in order for students to be in an environment conducive for learning." I'm just looking forward to sitting down, talking with everybody, and formalizing a game plan. I don't know if Council and our school board collectively have one game plan. In order for us to move forward, we have to have a game plan that everyone agrees upon. Or even if you say, "I may not completely 100 percent agree but I'm not going to do anything to derail the game plan." This is what is best for our children, so let's make that happen.

**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. This is something that is really near and dear to my heart. We ran on this issue, this was one of our platform issues. Not only during this campaign, but two years ago, and I'm pretty sure it's going to be something we'll be talking about for a long time. But I hope that here in Charlottesville, we can get it right.

When we say "how do we do so?" I think we have to be methodical and strategic in how we go about it. So you all released a report earlier in the year that said that somewhere between 300 and 500 students are without pre-K. Well, that means they're going to either a friend's house, they're going maybe to grandma's house, Auntie's house. They're going to a neighborhood childcare provider. They may be watching Dora all day. They may be eating non-nutritional snacks. I know what that feels like. I was a kid like that, but then I see the impact that early childhood

development has on a child when I think about my own daughter who I was lucky enough to be able to afford to send her to a pre-K school. She went to a Montessori school from ages 3 to 5. Her development is incredible. We see how it sets people apart. It sets children apart, rather. So, we have to make a concerted effort to make sure that that happens.

How do we do so? I think it's one or two ways. One of the things I'm really interested in looking at is reviewing the Blue Ribbon Commission report from a couple of years ago and let's see if we can figure out exactly what it's going to take for us to be able to have a centralized pre-K center. Ideally, in my personal estimation, that would be at Walker Upper Elementary School. You would go back to a more traditional model in which you have K through 5 and then you have Walker serving as the pre-K center for kids 3 and 4. You open Buford [Middle School] to grades six, seven and eight and then you have a traditional high school.

However, I know that comes with a lofty price tag. So what can we do as Council and also as a governing body working with our city manager to figure out how we can make this happen? I think everyone in this city – business investors, politicians, police officers and just the regular person on the street – would all agree that early childhood education is important. So if we all feel this is important, let's put our efforts in making sure that it happens. Because I don't want any children, regardless of whether you live in Westhaven, First Street or if you live in Belmont or Fry's Spring. I don't want any child to not have the opportunity to go and learn in those early years, ages three and four. We don't want any kid in our city not having the opportunity to be on par with their peers, or coming in already disadvantaged. Because I know first-hand what that does and I see it every day at school how the remnants, they kind of follow you all the way up into high school. So let's figure out how we can make it happen, and I'm looking forward to working with the school board and my fellow Councilors to make it happen.

**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 think we have to make a concerted effort to actively engage. Now, one of the things I do enjoy about our city is that we have the Our Town meetings and I think those meetings are active. However, we have to go a step further because we're not hearing from everybody in the city. And this is where I come into play because I have those relationships and I'm able to be able to bring out different people to different meetings and so on and so forth. But Council and our government and our leadership also has a responsibility to meet people where they are. You know, it's troubling sometimes when I hear from people in different neighborhoods who say that they only see our leaders when either there is something wrong or when they need something. They don't build those relationships on just a normal everyday regular time as you would do with anyone else. We have to improve our

engagement from that perspective. If the only time you see me in your neighborhood or see me, or see me around or I'm willing to talk to you is when something bad happens, or when I need your vote, or when I need to come out and support this "issue," I need to have that relationship built with you at any time. I want to know your kids just like you know mine because you're no different from me just because you live somewhere different. And that's what we have to work on, and again, that's why I feel like I'm in a position to really make an impact on this Council and really help us move this city forward, because we have those relationships already.

And it's not about me. It's about this community. So what can we do to leverage the relationships that we have, the community influence that we have, to make the city better. How great would it be if our councilors could go over for First Street and hang out and talk to everyone else the same way and maybe go into Fry's Spring or Belmont. You know? How great would that be to have people from Belmont and Westhaven hanging out and talking and kicking it with each other? How great would that be? I want to see that happen and I'm sure it will happen but it's going to take time, but we're going to get it done. Believe you me, Brian.

**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.**

I think that one of the things that we need to look at in terms of increased cooperation by the city, county and UVA in my personal estimation is our police practices. Our local law enforcement agencies I think personally do a pretty good job. However, I hear far too often from people in the community how they're not feeling respected or how they feel that X, Y and Z goes on and not enough happens. And that's something that we all need to work on. I think local government has a responsibility to ensure that people here in our city and our county and up at the University, that people know that they are valued. That people know that they matter. People know that they're going to have the same justices and liberties as everyone else. And I'll be honest, I don't know if everyone feels that way right now. Or, I know that everyone doesn't feel that way right now. So, what are we going to do as local government to make sure that that happens? Because if you live in my city, you live within my jurisdiction. That means I have a responsibility to make sure that you feel not only welcome, but you feel safe and you feel secure at all times. That's not happening right now.

What role do we play as local leaders to make sure it does happen? I think that's getting our local law enforcement agencies on the same page. And it's not an "us versus them." I don't have any issues with the local police chiefs. I know all three of them very well. So that doesn't mean it's "us versus them" but I do think that there are some things that need to happen in order for us to bridge that gap and close that divide. I don't want to see it widen. I want to see it shrink.

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

I think that we have task forces, we have planning commissions, we have individuals or bodies in place to provide us with recommendations. They are the “experts” in some cases. They spend a great deal of time analyzing and looking at these specific things and I think that we have a responsibility to adhere in some cases to what they say. I also think we have a responsibility to take into account their opinion in regards to what we should do moving forward.

Council, however, we have the final decision. It’s just kind of up to us to make sure that we do what’s best for the city. That’s not always going to happen. Not everybody’s going to get it right every time. However, we need to make sure that we’re listening to the people who we’ve placed in positions to serve as the “experts.” There’s no point in us putting them in those positions or appointing them to certain boards, commissions and bodies if we’re just going to ignore them.

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

I’ll be honest. There’s a few different things that I’ve been hearing and looking at. I’m not ready to say that there’s one particular transportation issue. There’s a few that I think that need to be reviewed right now. I’ve been hearing a lot from the taxis, the taxi cab drivers, in regards to how they feel about Uber and a lot of the practices in which they’ve been using isn’t fair. They would like to have more taxi stands. That’s a transportation issue.

I’ve been hearing people talk about how we would want to see a train station or commuter station to go from here to Richmond or here to D.C. Like a bullet train of sorts, people have been saying they want to see that. Of course, and they see want it different. They want to see more speed bumps. Some people say they want to see a traffic light here, a stop sign there. I don’t know if we can put one over the other and that’s part of what you signed up for when decide to run for Council. Everybody’s issue is a priority. I’m looking forward to working with the rest of Council to figure out how we can prioritize to do what’s best for the city, and I know we won’t get it all done because the question that you ask at the end, how will it be funded? Many of these initiatives cost money. People in Charlottesville don’t want their taxes raised, so where’s the money going to come from that? When you balance that or couple that with the needs of the schools, the needs of different social service departments, or community efforts. It’s a lot to take on. So we have to be strategic in how we go about making these decisions. But, I go back to what I said earlier, in order for us to make these decisions, Council needs to be on the same in how we go about doing so.

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

I was really, I would say, very much so intrigued by where the city is going in terms of upward mobility. Where we are going in terms of growth opposed to no-growth or staying where we are. I didn't move to Charlottesville to live in Atlanta. I'm from Atlanta. Or to live in a city that's like D.C. But then when you balance that or couple that with potential redevelopment for our public housing sites, or somewhere like Friendship Court. Those things, they need to have a fine-combed tooth. Honestly right now with regards to the comp plan, I would like to do some more digging, looking, reviewing and also hear the input of my fellow Councilors before saying "this is where I want to fix X, Y and Z." Anybody can be a renegade and just kind of say "I want to do yadda, yadda, yadda." But in order to get anything done in this city, you need three votes. I'm anxious to work with the Councilors and work with them to figure out how we can come up with something cohesively that's best for the city.

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

You look at programs like GO Driver. Those programs are absolutely fantastic. You look at some of the work that PVCC has been doing in terms of offering the HVAC certification classes. You look at CATEC and some of the things they've been doing in terms of plumbing classes, electrician classes, things of that nature. I think that may be where we need to go while also looking at... I'm a computer science teacher, so I'm a little biased here, but looking at the technical community. We look at WillowTree Apps. That's a place where you can work at. You don't need a college degree. You just need to know how to learn how to code. It's a place where a web designer or a web developer or a systems engineer or a network engineer, they don't have to have hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt in order to do that. That's just something that you can learn. HVAC. That's just something that you can learn. Plumbing. Electricians. Those are just things and trades and skills that you can learn and they'll always be with you.

And I think we need to look more at that model, and also look to attract more companies like WillowTree apps who we can tell that this is a hub where it's vibrant for younger people, but it still has a traditional sense, but we're going to make sure we have workers ready for you. We're going to make sure that we're placing an emphasis on our students today and I love what CATEC is doing with the institutes. But we're going to put an emphasis on these young people, and even some of the older people, in saying that "we're going to have you prepare for our jobs." For someone who lives in public housing who doesn't have a lot of educational experience and kind of may have been out of school for a while, kind of lacking somethings, they can go ahead and learn the code and still be right there with the rest of them. You can go and learn the code and still make potentially \$40,000, \$50,000, \$60,000 a year. That's something you can do without going to college. That's where we need to be looking, but then again, I'm a computer science teacher so I'm a little biased there.

**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?**

One hundred and sixty thousand percent. I'm joking here a little bit, but I'm serious at the same time. This is something that needs to happen. You know what kind of breaks my heart is when I drop off a kid from HYPE [Helping Young People Evolve] or I drop off a kid who may be on my baseball team or who I mentor, and I drop them off in an environment in which they are living in substandard conditions. When I drop them off in a place in which they're telling me their apartment may have mold or the park hasn't been cleaned in X amount of days or even months. When I'm dropping them off in an environment that's where they feel they don't have a lot of hope, that breaks my heart.

I know what that feels like. I grew up in public housing. I also know what it feels like to have your public housing site destroyed and then you go and move in a mixed income environment where you were initially apprehensive. But then I started to meet people who live lives completely different from what I was expecting. Completely different from what was normal to me. And now I'm afforded certain opportunities that I never would have had if I were just secluded in my own environment. I know what it's like to be in a place where you're in a melting pot and you get a chance to reach out and see different things. And that's needed.

However, what's also needed is the preservation of the neighborhood. People want to make sure that they're not displaced. I got a chance to go up and visit some of the public housing sites in Alexandria and also in Greenville, South Carolina and I love what they're doing down there. I love what they're doing in both sites. People were not displaced. People were able to stay where they are, or live relatively in their same neighborhoods. They were able to have a quality of life that was drastically improved from what they formerly had. I'm not going to say everything was peaches and cream, but it was better. And that's what we need. We need to be able to provide for our children. And I'm selfish with regards to redevelopment, because for me, this is about the kids. I want children who live in these environments to live without limits. I want these children to know that regardless of where you live, you can go and be anything. And currently where they live, I don't know if they always feel that. It is very difficult to make it out of some of the situations in which our children are growing up today. Changing your address will not change all of that. However, it can provide you with a spark that you normally don't have. That needs to happen.

You asked me what my number one priority was earlier and I said I was looking forward to working with Council. Number two, and probably 1A is getting this redevelopment process not only moving, but making sure that it happens. Not Vinegar Hill again, because I know there's a lot of mistrust and distrust and people feeling like X, Y and Z may happen all over again. Not just running people out of the neighborhood, but making sure that we get it right so that we can provide people and most importantly for me, children, with the better opportunity to have a higher quality of life. And if you don't want that? Then I don't know what to say to you. If you don't

want our children who live in these neighborhoods to have a better quality of life, I honestly don't know what to say and you probably shouldn't vote for me. That's what I'm going to be working for.