



2011 Charlottesville City Council Candidate Interview September 2011

Candidate: Brandon Collins (I)

On November 8, 2011, voters in the City of Charlottesville go to the polls to elect their representatives to three seats on Charlottesville City Council. This recording is Brian Wheeler's September 23, 2011 interview with Brandon Collins (I). Other candidates in this race include: Scott Bandy (I), Bob Fenwick (I), Kathleen M. Galvin (D), Satyendra Huja (D), Dede Smith (D), and Andrew Williams (I).

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

http://cvilletomorrow.typepad.com/charlottesville_tomorrow_/2011/10/collins.html

Complete election coverage is available on the Charlottesville Tomorrow website

<http://www.cvilletomorrow.org/elections>

INTERVIEW

Mr. Collins, 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 and The Daily Progress. 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 and community design.

As you are aware, candidates been provided in advance only the general topics for these questions. 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 City Council?

I am a lifelong resident of the City of Charlottesville. I am thirty-eight years old. I have a daughter here, and I have always considered Charlottesville a great place to raise my daughter. Having grown up here and lived here, I have seen some of the great things about Charlottesville and some of the worst things about Charlottesville and I think I can relate to a lot of the folks out there that are struggling, that are suffering, and that have been through hard times.

What basically qualifies me to be on city council are my politics, and that is that I place the needs of human beings and people over the needs of developers, or markets, or business. That's where I am coming from politically, and I think that it's ultimately what we should all look for in a city councilor—somebody who is looking at the people of Charlottesville, the residents of Charlottesville, rather than other interests.

Specifically though, I have been an activist in this community, and also at the state and national level, in a number of different ways. I have been involved in the anti-war movement for quite some time. I have been involved in a lot of labor activism, immigrants' rights activism, a lot of environmental activism, and I think what a lot of people don't necessarily always realize is that when you participate in these things and you devote your life to being active, that you get a very real understanding of how different systems work. That helps me have an approach to these issues that Charlottesville is facing when it comes to labor and our environment and a whole host of other things.

I have offered resolutions to the city council, some of which have been accepted. There was a unanimous resolution that council passed last winter concerning immigrants' rights—a resolution addressed to the General Assembly. I helped to co-found a lobbying group called Virginia United Against Oppression, which is a group on the state level working against anti-worker bills and anti-immigrant legislation that was coming through and we'll be reviving that of course for the next session as well, and a whole host of other things.

Again, I think being a lifelong resident, being someone who works and does not make enough money to live here, well I live here, but it's a struggle, and someone who places the needs of human beings [first], those are my real qualifications.

Philosophically, I believe whole-heartedly that people should lead from the bottom up and I hope to be a councilor that will listen to all our residents and respect democracy and respect that I am not here to lead, that the people should be here to lead me.

2. What is your transportation agenda for the city? Does it require more money? How will you fund AND implement it?

My ideas on transportation are almost wholly centered on public transit and expanding public transportation. Of course we need to do much more to increase pedestrian transit. When we talk about pedestrian transit I think one thing that people aren't always aware of is that it's also how people with disabilities get around. I've been out here talking to a lot of folks who have a hard time in Charlottesville still, folks who are disabled, and we can do a lot more to make things better for those folks.

I think there is a great interest in the city in expanding our bike lanes and doing much more for bike transportation, and I'm all for that, but I'm basically focused on a city that is built and based on public transportation rather than automobile-based transportation. I would like to see a great expansion of public transportation. I think our long-term transit development plan can be moved more to the short-term, which will require a little extra funding, and then we can set new goals. Some of those goals you can find in the comprehensive plan, that to my knowledge have not really not even been discussed, such as direct shuttle routes and Park and Ride, very simple things that don't require a ton of money.

With public transportation, we get a lot of grant money for that and we need to continue to secure that money. There's legislation in Congress that's just been sitting around and not passed that would allow us to use some of that grant funding for actual operations not just for infrastructure things for the bus system. At any cost, we should not be looking to build too many new roads and instead always be looking to see how we can expand public transit, see how we can get more people on the bus, and see how we can plan our city to be based on our bus routes, some of that may require rearranging some of how we deal with our bus routes. With this, I think if we can use our transportation grant money that we get from the state for public transportation, we should always be looking to do that. It's not the easiest thing to do, but it is legal. It's something we are going to have to work really hard at. If we are going to have to use funding from the general fund, I am completely in favor of that. I think public transportation is one way we can really work towards having a sustainable city. That's my transportation plan in a nutshell.

3. How should the city, county and the University of Virginia work together to enhance our community's unique character and economic vitality??

Well this is a tough question. I think everyone knows that things between the county and the city have not been great for quite some time. I am looking forward to at some point getting beyond the [Meadow Creek] Parkway and the water supply plan, and in to really seeing what the county and the city

have in common and working towards those goals. On the things that we have conflict with, I think that's perfectly fine, cooperation to me is not the end that we are looking for, it's a means to an end. We can cooperate a lot on a regional transit plan, or a regional transit authority, if there's interest in the county for that. I think in the long term we really need to make a list of priorities for the city when it comes to the county and determine which of those are really worth taking a stand for and what is somewhat negotiable, and try to work from there.

The county, I think, has very little interest in environmental planning, planning based upon sustainability, and that's going to be a point of conflict for a long time to come. I feel strongly that we need to stand up for the planet, stand up for our city when it comes to these things. It's not the easiest thing to do, but I feel like we have to do it.

When it comes to the University, we have a real opportunity with Teresa Sullivan as a new President. Also Leonard Sandridge being gone and the many roles that he filled are going to be filled by more than just one person. With new administration coming in to UVA that gives us a good opportunity to present our case and say to the University that they have not really done enough for the community and while they have their interests, their interests directly affect our residents, particularly our most disadvantaged residents and have a huge effect on our housing. We need to make this a priority for the university. We need to making gaining a living wage for employees of the university also a priority. They are our largest employer, they set the bar for the rest of the city in a lot of ways when it comes to wages.

We can work with them--we already do with the trolley system--we work with them in a number of ways. If we look at the trolley system, it's working out pretty o.k. We can seek perhaps more funding from them. We can't make them do it, but I think that would be in their interest and our interest to really engage the community and make things better.

We need to address the coal plant at UVA. The city has very little leverage to make any changes about that, but it is our biggest polluter and it's affecting our residents and it's affecting our quality of life and I think we need to also make that a priority item when we deal with the university.

4. What changes, if any, would you make to the city's Comprehensive Plan?

This is a big one. The comprehensive plan is really kind of scatter brained in my mind. It's an important plan. A lot of analysis goes into it. Some good ideas come out of it. And then it just sort of seems to sit on a desk somewhere and nobody pays a ton of attention to it.

I will say that in the environmental portions of the plan, there's been a lot of movement. It does not necessarily include, however, how we deal with new roads, or our water supply, and how we protect natural spaces. There's a little bit of lip service in the comprehensive plan about that. On the whole when we look at the environment, when we look at jobs, when we look at housing, our economy, these things need to find some kind of way to interlock inside the comprehensive plan and then we can move on it.

When you look at transportation in the comprehensive plan, there's some good ideas, as I mentioned--Park and Ride, direct service shuttles—but nothing has become of that. When we look at housing, I think we need to completely rework that and to be very clear that our mission is to provide affordable housing in a way that the market's not going to drive up rents further than they are. We really need to have a place in there for transition points between--say homelessness into [single room occupancy units], from SRO's into public housing, from public housing into renting and owning a home. Those transition points are really the sticking point and why we are not really getting anywhere in a lot of ways with helping people move up the housing ladder. When it comes to home ownership, we can pay a lot more attention in the comprehensive plan to getting people into their own homes and maybe have a very different approach as to how we are going to deal with that.

The same goes for economy. Inside the plan, we place a lot of hope on incentives to businesses but I think on the whole that's not necessarily working out, and in a sense it's not really working out for housing as well. We need to have a much more aggressive approach on the economy and when we are looking for a business to come to Charlottesville, we need to identify where and what kind of business we want, how many people we want to employ when we are trying to lure or get business to come here, and make sure they are meeting our needs instead of the other way around. Instead of just assuming that all business coming here is good, and that we'll do anything and give incentives to anyone, I think we need to be very careful about that and I'd really like to rework that.

One point back to housing, and I'm not sure it's actually in the comprehensive plan, but this 5 percent of units being deemed affordable for certain projects, I think we need to change that in the near term to be at least 50 percent. Five percent is nothing and we shouldn't grant any kind of incentives for that, it's really a giveaway. If you have 20 units, and 5 percent of it is affordable for you to be able to get a tax credit on your project, that's 1 unit out of 20, and that's not doing anything for affordable housing.

I think we need to rework a lot of the comprehensive plan, and you can go through it, and I could list everything on every portion of it, but we are not going to do that today.

5. Last month the Charlottesville Regional Chamber of Commerce reported that Charlottesville lost 3,248 jobs during the years 2000 to 2010. What specifically should city council do to promote employment?

Well it's a hot topic and I am glad to bring this consistently to council's attention and I have been raising this a lot in the campaign. I feel like we have a duty to do everything we can to get people jobs that pay a living wage, and if not, then we have a duty to directly employ those people. There is a lot of movement in this city to have a much more sustainable city, to improve our infrastructure, improve our neighborhoods, and we can put a lot of people to work doing that. We can get outside funding to do some of that stuff.

Overall, I would like to be at a point four years from now where we can begin to consider guaranteeing that every resident can get a job. The way we can get there is by working to reverse the balance of jobs to workers, providing a lot more jobs, to the point where the market on human labor begins to shift in favor of workers so that all workers are beginning to earn a better wage.

My plan for getting started on this is to get a job center open in downtown Charlottesville. Not to mimic the Virginia Employment Commission, or the workforce development center, as it's called now, but to supplement that. This would be a central location that can coordinate different agencies, different offices and a wide range of private business and human resources here in Charlottesville to make sure that people have access to jobs that they have access to job training. Temporary employment is something we should be looking at, a lot of cities do that. We have a great foundation with some new programs that I think can be expanded and built upon, and the model for these programs can be used in other ways.

One of those is the Section 3 office that is there to coordinate funding for HUD projects, Housing and Urban Development funding, that's supposed to be using a local workforce made up of public housing and low income residents. We actually have a coordinator for that stipulation that HUD makes, it's a new position, but for part of that position we are looking at ways that, not just for HUD contracts, but for other city contracts, and that office can seek to sign up contractors and sort of pre-approve them to be able to work with a local workforce and ensure people get work. We can do a lot with that and we should use that for all city contracts and make sure every city contract includes a local workforce that gets paid a decent wage.

The other thing was the ex-offenders home to work program where ex-offenders leaving jail, get out of jail, and they have a way to at least get a leg up on having some work. It's in the pilot stage and I would like to see it greatly expanded to put a lot of ex-offenders to work. The model of taking our residents and giving them a job on a work crew, or a public works crew, a parks and recreation crew, for perhaps a temporary amount time at a living

wage, the city pays a living wage. I'd like to see that expanded and I think we can use that model for other residents as well.

I think we can greatly expand public works. We can expand public transportation. We can really do a lot with parks and recreation. We can expand our parks. We can greatly upgrade our city to set the bar high and say we are going to make every city-owned piece of property energy self-sufficient. We are going to install solar panels and retrofit all of our city-owned property. This could be a big project and put a lot of people to work. It would take funding from the general fund and I think that we can make the case to people that 3,000 lost jobs in ten years is way too much and we have an obligation to put people to work.

Again, attracting new [business], perhaps industry that hires great numbers of people that are going to greatly benefit our community, is something we need to be looking at and we need to be very careful about what those businesses are.

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

I think we need to do something about poverty. This is a multi-faceted issue and that is basically my main focus. When we talk about poverty, it's not always just the people who are unemployed or the people who get food stamps, sometimes it's our teachers who are working and they are not making enough money to live here. There are so many things to look at. There's employment and there's wages. There's housing, there's transportation, it's a multi-faceted problem. I think I've got things in my platform that focus specifically on housing, jobs, public transportation, and the environment. I think in a lot of ways how we deal with our planet also effects how we deal with people. One thing that's going to be a big issue is how the city grows and are we pushing poor people out of town because it gets so expensive. I don't think we should. We have established neighborhoods here and I'd like to see our residents be able to live and work here. But to be able to do that we have to do something meaningful to make their lives much more meaningful economically.

Approaching poverty, homelessness, yes at the bottom, joblessness, the working poor, addressing our housing needs, those are my priorities. There's a whole lot more to it than just saying we are going to pass a few resolutions and we're going to get some programs going, but that's going to be the main focus that I have going in to city council.

7. What would you improve with respect to the city's parks and recreational facilities?

I'd like to see us seeking out and gaining more park land. I know we're not necessarily getting too much more space inside of our 10 square miles, but you know we might be able to repurpose some of these things. I would love to see our parks upgraded. I would like to see for public use, or even as a works program, an urban farm if we can find the land and if the neighborhoods that have places where this might happen are comfortable with it. We need to complete trails. We should have a lot more trails. I have been to other cities and I have seen some amazing trail systems and this is a great thing.

We need to protect our parks as well. That means not bulldozing them, not running roads through our parks. When we look at McIntire Park, and everything that's going on there, I'm happy to see that the renovations of the park are a public process. I hope a lot of people will participate in that as there's going to be some tough decisions when it comes to what the park is going to look like in a few years, road or no road.

I would like to see more park land. I would like to see more public space being used for something other than parking or various things that we don't necessarily need. It's not the easiest thing to expand park land, but we should always be on the lookout for ways we can create new parks.

8. Are you planning to seek a new vote by the council on the previously approved 50-year water supply plan and how would you change the plan, if at all?

I am. I hope that, no matter who gets elected that in January they will at least take a straw poll to see where people stand on the water supply plan. If there's support for changing the current plan, I would definitely be seeking an official vote and work towards getting to a place where we can take a much longer view and a much healthier approach where we consider conservation and use of existing resources as the norm. Which means dredging to meet our water needs, and when we have to revisit the plan 10 years from now we can reconsider the dam or not. We may find that our demand has continued to go down as I think it will. I think we can dredge now and we can consider damming much later in the future. We are in no danger of running out of water. By the [Rivanna Water and Sewer Authority's] own admission, there will be times, no matter what happens, where restrictions because of drought will kick in and it doesn't really matter what's going on. We are not in any danger in the near future of running out of water, we are not in any real danger of running out of water during a drought. I think we should dredge and consider damming decades down the road. I don't think that's a decision

we need to make right now and it's going to cost a lot of money if we move ahead with the dam.

That's where I stand on that. I hope if I am elected that we will have a majority on council that will be able to revisit that. It won't be the easiest thing to do because we do have other partners when it comes to this, but the original decision in September 2010 that council made I thought was pretty good—that we would dredge and consider raising the existing dam and move forward on that. I think that was a decent compromise at that time and I hope we can get back into that line of thinking in January 2012.

9. Would you support switching from at-large seats to ward-based representation for elections to Charlottesville City Council? Why or why not?

I considered this a lot when I was first crafting my platform and it's not in my platform right now. I would like to see the amount of people on council expanded--the amount of people on council—I think that would be healthy for us. I do have cautious support for a ward-based system, but there are some critical things that need to be straightened out before I would fully support that.

One of those is the direct election of a mayor, and how many seats we would have on there, and what those folks are going to get paid. I think direct election of the mayor is critical with that. I think with ward-based elections we would need at least 3 at-large councilors to bring some balance. My fear is that if Charlottesville continues to gentrify, that the political power of poor people and established residents will be diluted as they get pushed to different parts of the city and pushed out of the city and its going to leave a great deal of poor folks, scattered throughout the city, and that will diminish their political influence more than its already been diminished.

One way to address this is to have another referendum. I know it's happened before in the past, so maybe this is a first step for that, but I would like to see direct election of the mayor, and some at-large seats, and then I would probably be in favor of ward-based elections.

10. If the federal lawsuit opposing the construction of the grade-separated interchange for the Meadow Creek Parkway is unsuccessful, will you support completion of the parkway?

I won't, though it's hard to say after the lawsuit what any next step in having the road be done would be. Now if there is a majority on council that wants a new approach when it comes to the road, I think we can make that happen and I would be in favor of making that happen.

I think it's going to be very, very difficult at this point if the lawsuit-- if the interchange is going to go through---there's very little that we're going to be able to do. It's under construction. These folks really want the parkway done before January, before a new council is seated, and they want everything in place. I do not support the Meadow Creek Parkway and I will not support it on council, though I have a healthy understanding that this may be close to a done deal, but don't tell any of my friends that.

11. Should city council support moving the Rivanna Sewer Pump Station from its current location in Woolen Mills even if it will cost city and county ratepayers an additional \$15 million to \$18 million to do so?

I think it's time for that pump station to be dealt with. I live close to that area and you get the smell from over there and we need to do something about that pump station anyways. I think the question is where do we put it, and that's the important thing to consider. I think, yes, it does need to be moved from the Woolen Mills neighborhood, but where are we going to put it? I am in favor of spending the money on that. I think that it needs to be included in our plan.

We can do a lot when it comes to how ratepayers are treated in the city. I think one thing that's very interesting is the tiered rate system that we might consider to encourage conservation. I think we can do a lot more to ensure that people don't have their water service cut off when they can't pay their bills. And this whole thing, they've got this fund, I forget what it's called now, that offsets what's really going on, it really obfuscates the cost of everything we do. But I think the real money drainer on ratepayers and taxpayers is going to be this new dam and new pipeline. Moving a pump station that we need to do something about is not our biggest problem for ratepayers.