

Abigail Emison
Planning and Zoning Commission Application

Question 1: What is your vision for growth and development in Asheville?

Continued growth and development is essential to Asheville's economic and social health, so we must structure rules to harness the positive aspects of development while avoiding the negative.

I do not think there is a simple rule for growth and development in Asheville; instead, my vision is a measured approach focused on intelligent, continued growth and development. I believe that growth is a natural and necessary part of the City's development, but it is imperative that the growth be sustainable: creating quality jobs and opportunity for residents, while making the City a more appealing and attractive place to live, work, and play. Development should adhere to "green" principles, not simply in building materials, but through green infrastructure practices (e.g., sidewalks, permeable paving, bioswales) and an emphasis on infill development. Concentrating and clustering development in existing developed areas is important because it helps renew neglected areas, knit communities together, and reduces overall infrastructure costs. In the end, Asheville must continue to grow and encourage new development, but not without restriction—instead, in ways that enhance Asheville's future.

Question 2: Do you believe Asheville has taken an approach that is too "pro-growth" or "anti-growth" over the past 5-6 years? Please share your reasons.

I believe Asheville has had a narrow view of growth over the past 5-6 years and that things are improving and considerable opportunities exist to do even better.

Over the past 5-6 years, Asheville has been both very focused on pushing projects through the development process (rushing to keep up with the constant pressure of new projects before late 2008), as well as trying to encourage developers to bring new projects during the economic downturn. Viewing projects on a case-by-case basis, while necessary to review the technical aspects, needs not occur in a vacuum, and until recently, Asheville has not evaluated adequately the cumulative impact of these individual development projects. This has led to vague planning for the future that has not been particularly helpful to Council—for example, providing goals without any substantive guidance on implementation.

I believe that Asheville has made some steps recently to improve its long-term planning. The Downtown Master Plan is a good example of how to take a comprehensive view of development and look at the impact development can have in a neighborhood or region of the City, and is an approach that Asheville should take going forward.

Question 3: How strictly should interpretation and application of the Unified Development Ordinance be applied?

The Unified Development Ordinance (UDO) is Asheville's contract with its citizens on the development of the City, and as such, should be carefully enforced, with appropriate amendments passed and variances granted.

I believe the UDO is put in place to guide the development of the City in an orderly, safe, and productive manner. As such, planning staff should adhere closely to the UDO as a general rule.

The UDO allows for variances to its rules for specific properties in specific circumstances, and those variances should not be unreasonably withheld. Additionally, if there are systematic problems with the UDO, Council should pass amendments to the UDO to fix those problems.

Finally, because the UDO is Asheville's contract with its citizens on the development of the City, it should be revised if the citizens of Asheville decide that it fundamentally does not reflect our vision of the development of Asheville.

Question 4: Name one Planning and Zoning Commission decision in the last 18 months you've agreed with and one you've disagreed with or would have struggled with. Please explain your rationale for each.

I agree with the Planning and Zoning Commission's decision to rezone the parking area of the Chamber of Commerce building from RM-8 to CM-1 to accommodate the relocation of a Farmer's Market. The bulk of the work of the Commission is small decisions that cumulatively impact the growth and development of the City. It is not only the handful of big-ticket or high-profile decisions that garner a lot of attention. This rezoning decision, while incremental in the development of the neighborhood and the City, is an example of how the Commission exercised its authority by listening to the community and making a decision that enabled local businesses to grow, improving a neighborhood, and providing access to fresh fruits and vegetables that might not otherwise have been accessible to the community.

I would have struggled with the Planning and Zoning Commission's decision to approve the Larchmont Project. There are many positive aspects to the project: it will bring much-needed affordable housing to Asheville, will be an infill development, and will provide a necessary transitional zone from a commercial to a primarily single-family area. Additionally, the Larchmont will be in an excellent location to encourage walkability and transit use, especially with its proposed sidewalk connections.

However, the issue of parking remains unresolved: the 70 onsite spaces (just enough for the residents) would push visitor parking to the streets and potentially overwhelm the neighborhood. Additionally, the Larchmont is a very dense development, and the density comparisons offered at the meeting were not relevant; they were either in areas with a different character (East Chestnut, Cumberland) or were of a different use (comparing commercial buildings). In addition, the local community opposition would have weighed heavily on my decision. Finally, the project required overriding the UDO, which is never an ideal situation; the citizens of Asheville should be able to rely on the UDO.

Question 5: What are some of the positive or negative effects of Asheville's zoning regulations?

Asheville's zoning regulations are a net positive: they protect investment and guide future development in a way that benefits citizens.

The City of Asheville's zoning regulations protect both residential and commercial investments by allowing property owners to rely upon restrictions against unwanted uses of land by their neighbors. A homeowner can rest easy knowing that a cement factory won't be built next to her house next year, and a shop owner can invest in a new façade because she knows that the adjacent properties will remain retail establishments and will help attract more customers.

In addition, the zoning regulations facilitate development by informing developers where the City and citizens want development to happen, and encouraging specific types of development that will be most successful and desired. Asheville's zoning also channels development efforts into collective community benefits, such as improving walkability through the addition of required sidewalks and sidewalk connections, creating better landscaping and buffers of commercial developments, and keeping the light pollution at night at a minimum ("dark skies" compliance).