

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

The old days of fueling our local economy on luxury condos, sprawling subdivisions, and speculative real-estate flips have gone the way of the housing bubble, and expecting to rely on the return of that kind of growth in any significant measure is as unrealistic as wishing for the good-paying factory jobs of 30 years ago to come back. Fortunately, Asheville is already prepared, in theory at least, for the new post-recession reality: As a community, we have embraced a clear and practical vision for sustainable, "smart" growth and development as expressed in our comprehensive "2025 Plan" and our related master plans for downtown, parks and greenways, etc.

Sustainability is our best hope for survivability in these challenging times. But it requires constantly deepening our understanding of how to apply it. It isn't just about LEED standards and landscaping buffers: As our 2025 Plan's Vision chapter explains, sustainability is "a balancing of economic objectives, social goals, and environmental resources in a way that works for both present and future generations." Rather than a single-minded focus on maximizing financial profit and revenue -- which addicts communities to repeated self-destructive cycles of boom-bust growth -- sustainability requires that we diversify our planning perspective, and instead strive to maximize what's often termed the "triple bottom line" of environment, equity, and economics.

Asheville's ordinances make clear that the Planning & Zoning Commission's mandate is broader than simply reviewing and approving new developments and zoning changes. P&Z is also supposed to plan pro-actively for the city's future -- to "perform studies and surveys of the present conditions and probable future development of the City and its environs," to "formulate and recommend to City Council the adoption or amendment of a comprehensive plan and other plans, as necessary," and to "review the terms of the UDO from time to time." Along these lines, I suggest some specific priorities in the letter attached to my application. Overall, however, I envision P&Z as working to examine and address the numerous gaps that exist between the spirit of our plans and the letter of our regulations, with the goal of making our city simultaneously greener, more affordable, and more prosperous -- and doing so, as much as possible, in the kind of collaborative, diverse, transparent process for which Asheville is increasingly receiving national admiration.

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've always been bothered by the false "with-us-or-against-us" dichotomy these labels imply. We've had many good development projects in that period that have been welcomed by residents, usually in the form of tacit approval (because most people have very busy lives). But a relative handful of insensitive, inappropriate developments -- way out of scale or character with their surroundings, or harmful to the environment, or a dubious risk of public resources, or an apparent crony deal -- have compelled large numbers of citizens to take the time to show up and speak out. They don't do this because they are anti-growth NIMBYs, as some who stand to profit from such developments typically accuse them of being, but because they care deeply about this unique mountain gem they've chosen above all other places, whether by moving or staying here, as their home.

In my experience working on the Downtown Master Plan, I have repeatedly observed a profound disconnect between the development community and the general public. For example, almost every architect, developer, and city planning staffer praises the Hotel Indigo as a good building, whereas almost every layperson remarks on it as ugly and badly situated. Development professionals take for granted the subjectivity of architectural design and the sanctity of private property rights, whereas the general populace seems to consider it common sense that buildings like the BB&T are awful and those like the Jackson Building are great, and that a big development is an imposition on the public sphere that the public ought to have some say about.

The only effective remedy for this cognitive dissonance that I've seen is for both sides to sit together in a room where they can openly disagree on specific proposals, heatedly debate underlying prejudices, freely discuss possible solutions, and ultimately dialogue about principles they've discovered they hold in common. I've seen

over and over again how active official encouragement of public input and comment compels professionals to climb down from the ivory tower and re-examine their assumptions, and laypeople to elevate their opinions from gut reactions to nuanced understandings.

Public input is not the bogeyman some developers seem to dread, and it insults responsible developers to treat it as a bargaining chip in negotiations over incentives. The result of a collaborative, participatory public process is invariably smarter and more mutually beneficial than either side of a developer-vs.-residents divide would have produced on its own. That's why I also believe we need a much more diversely representative P&Z.

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

Appointed development-review commissions such as P&Z are meant to be watchdogs -- to ensure, without favoritism or prejudice, that growth conforms to the regulations we as a community have approved through our elected representatives on City Council. This doesn't mean the commissions have to insist on the rote letter of the law no matter the individual circumstance. They sit in the equivalent of a judicial position (sometimes literally so); and just as judges need to weigh the interpretation and application of an individual law against the Constitution, so our committees need to weigh how they apply the UDO against the city's guiding planning principles. (It helps when an ordinance's intent is expressly stated in its wording, which I successfully advocated for in Downtown Master Plan ordinances.)

Asheville is not a one-size-fits-all town. Our topography and existing buildings and neighborhoods are so varied that no rule can cover every circumstance. Review commissions need to allow variances or conditions when applying a rule too strictly would create a counterproductive hardship in a particular situation. For example, a church in West Asheville recently applied for a change in zoning so that a building on its property could be adaptively re-used as a school. The new zoning called for widening the existing, mature landscape buffer next to a neighboring residence, but doing so would significantly reduce parking, and the neighbor had no objection to the current buffer. I felt the church's request for a variance to keep the buffer as is was a reasonable one.

But I believe it is wrong to make exceptions to important rules based simply on a developer's preference rather than hardship, or because a commission member personally disagrees with a regulation the city has tasked him to enforce, or in order to cater to an influential developer. These are the kinds of subjective, political factors that should have no place in the development-review process.

4. Name one Planning & 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 agreed with P&Z's decision last June to approve Sunny Point Cafe's conditional zoning application for additional office space. The West Asheville restaurant, which many locals consider a green-business pioneer for its edible landscape and permeable parking lot, wanted to convert a vacant house behind the restaurant into its office. Adaptive re-use is always more sustainable than demolition and new construction, so I supported this. Sunny Point made a reasonable request to reduce the new zoning's required buffer width but add a buffering wall, in order to avoid shading the vegetables they grow on-site for the restaurant. P&Z members OK'd this, but conscientiously addressed a neighbor's understandable concern about the location of the restaurant's dumpster until all sides agreed it was resolved.

I disagreed with the way P&Z handled Ingles Markets' recent request to exempt two proposed superstores from important city ordinances on gas-canopy lighting and parking-lot landscaping. To what I wrote about this issue in the letter attached to my application, I would add that I felt P&Z members gave no appearance of understanding or seeking to understand the rationales behind these ordinances, or the hazardous precedent that would be set by granting the request (which was based on preference rather than hardship), even though

concerned city planning staffers clearly pointed this out. One member stated he would vote to accept the landscaping exception because he had opposed the ordinance when City Council passed it -- an opinion he had every right to express, but I felt it was an abuse of his authority as an appointee to substitute his personal will for the will of the people's elected representatives.

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

On the positive side, the regulations passed as part of the Downtown Master Plan will -- if followed -- ensure that new development enhances a vibrant, pedestrian-friendly, economically healthy downtown. They are already serving as a model for the rest of the city (for example, improving the Central Business District zoning in West Asheville). One aspect of the "building form" requirements for setbacks and stepbacks that has not yet received much notice is that they have great potential for greening downtown with gardens planted on the sunny, airy balconies and rooftops these requirements encourage.

I also believe that the seven conditional use standards (Section 7-16-2(c) of the UDO) serve the city very well as a decision-making filter for screening appropriate from inappropriate developments. Like the triple bottom line, the "seven standards" provide a useful lens through which to view and judge smart growth.

On the negative side, I am deeply concerned about how little protection our regulations provide our valuable historic buildings. They are the reason for downtown's revival -- yet if new owners wanted to knock down, say, the signature Jackson Building, there is nothing in our current zoning regulations to prevent them.

I also question why we do not require measures such as performance bonds to minimize failed developments such as the Health Adventure's that produce nothing but denuded, eroding earth.