The Asheville Downtown Association periodically surveys its members and the community to get feedback on issues and challenges facing downtown. We’ll utilize this feedback to formulate the questions included in this survey.

The top issues noted in the survey for maintaining the vibrancy of downtown are: supporting local businesses, safety, more parking/transportation options, maintenance of infrastructure, addressing homelessness and affordable/workforce housing.

**Downtown Issues Questionnaire for Asheville City Council Candidates**

**YOUR NAME** Andrew Fletcher

**QUESTION:** Please tell us why you are running for City Council.

I’m running for city council because I can bring a new voice to council, from somebody who works in the trenches of city council and understands the challenges of what it’s like to live and work in this city. I’m running because I’ve seen what happens when government fails to listen to the people who make this city such a great experience for residents and tourists alike. And I’m running because I’ve shown the ability to tackle tough questions with civility and courage, and I want to bring that capability to council. I’m confident my voice could benefit the entire city of Asheville, with a special focus on the many people in our city who are afraid that this city’s success is about to leave them behind.

**QUESTION:** What do you feel are downtown’s most pressing challenges?

I think the greatest challenge we face is to maintain our authentic charm in the face of success. Asheville’s downtown is the envy of other cities across the country because locals made downtown a great place to be. A great way to do that is to support the locally owned businesses and their employees. New developments can be a part of that success, or it can undermine it. Or a mix of both that can make for some very difficult judgements. To make those judgements, I’ll put a high price on the value of our culture and quality of life for workers. The wrong types of development can trade the long-term viability of business when it sacrifices our culture in order to make a quick dollar. It can drive out small business owners. That’s the wrong direction for Asheville. What’s more, that already happened in this town many years ago, and it took us decades to rebuild. Let’s not do that again, and let’s not forget who rebuilt this town.
QUESTION: What is the role of downtown in the greater Asheville community?

I spend most of my time away from my rented home in Kenilworth working, socializing, eating and shopping downtown. Our downtown is the cultural and economic driver for the entire city, and has led to the resurgence of the rest of the city. It’s (almost always) a great place to be. It’s the source of much of our property value, and serves as the public square for the civic and political life of the city.

QUESTION: What smart growth strategies and funding mechanisms would you employ to support thoughtful growth in downtown that increases the city's tax base while also maintaining its character?

ISSUE: Supporting local business

QUESTION: What strategies would you employ to ensure the sustainability of small locally owned businesses in downtown?

I want to level the playing field for small businesses. Traditionally, it’s only large out of town businesses that get incentivized to expand their business here. We should incentivize small local businesses by making sure they have access to start up financing, and make it easier to apply for existing government programs. We need to work with small businesses to make sure that they have the support they need to stay downtown, thrive and expand.

ISSUE: Parking/Transportation

QUESTION: What improvements to our parking, transit system and alternative transportation options would you advocate for to ease pressure on the parking system?

I would like to address parking and transit policy together. First off, public transit needs to be reliable enough for commuters to use it without fear of being fired because their bus didn’t show up. To increase ridership, I would institute fare-free riding. Many of those riders would represent one less care competing for parking.

As far as parking goes, I’d like to shift the cost burden from locals to tourists by creating a local rate to park. I’d also like to work to transition some of the many surface parking locations into parking garages with ground floor retail that are built in such a way as to be transitioned into other uses many years from now if they are no longer needed. That would make sure that our investments in a development are protected, even when the demand for parking changes in the future.
ISSUE: Safety
QUESTION: How would you work with the police department to ensure adequate resources to maintain public safety? What strategies would you employ to address the concerns regarding policing brought forth during the recent budget conversation?

There are some really good arguments for having a dedicated downtown unity. Unfortunately, those arguments were not heard because the way in which the Police Department communicated with the public. It undermined trust by using suspect data and a lack of transparency. The community policing model used downtown is the right way to go.

ISSUE: Infrastructure
QUESTION: Identify your top three downtown infrastructure needs. How would you prioritize funding for these projects and how do you feel infrastructure impacts business success?

#1: Sidewalks and pedestrian infrastructure. We need to make downtown safe and accessible. We need wider sidewalks with less impediments leftover from years gone by, like unused light poles. We need crosswalks. Instead of issuing jaywalking tickets in problem areas, build a cross walk. Learn from how people use downtown, and let the infrastructure follow. When you look at price per user, building pedestrian infrastructure where it’s needed is a great deal. And as a long time advocate with the Asheville Buskers Collective, I know first hand that what’s good for the pedestrian is good for the busker, and vice versa.

#2 Benches. I propose 99 new benches for downtown. The city has for years been removing benches as a misguided response to problems associated with homelessness. This is flat-out backwards thinking. Homelessness is a separate issue that needs a separate solution. We all deserve more places to sit, and if we want to get people out of their cars and encourage a healthier, walking community, public seating has to be located where it’s needed.

# Parking. Right now we need more, but will we always? I don’t think so. The autonomous vehicle revolution is coming. Exactly when is uncertain, but surely within the lifespan of a typical parking garage. So I’ll just repeat what I said above: I’d like to work to transition some of the many surface parking locations into parking garages with ground floor retail. It’s possible to build parking decks in such a way as to be transitioned into other uses many years from now when they are no longer needed. That would make sure that our public investments in a development are protected, even when the demand for parking changes in the future. And I’d aggressively pursue public-private partnerships to meet this need in a way that didn’t create long term cost burdens for taxpayers.

ISSUE: Homelessness
QUESTION: What steps would you take to support the Homeless Initiative Advisory Committee’s 5-year plan released earlier this year? What other strategies or initiatives would you consider to address homelessness in our community?
First, prevention. Many persons who find themselves homeless had temporary financial difficulties that put them on the street, which become compounded after eviction. Creating an emergency anti-eviction safety net fund could help people stay in their homes, and buy them the time to achieve financial stability again.

Second, I recognize that state funding for mental health services has been cut year after year. That shifts a burden of caring for people who desperately need care to police officers, jails, and charities who are often overwhelmed. Routing people into addiction recovery and mental health programs instead of jails and shelters must be done.

Third, long term housing should be made available. In other cities that decide to house their homeless instead of criminalizing them, the effects have been positive. I’d like to explore that here.

**ISSUE: Affordable/Workforce Housing**

**QUESTION:** What is your position on housing diversity in downtown? How would you direct staff to utilize funds from the recently passed Affordable Housing Bond? What other strategies would you like to see our city develop to address the affordability issue?

Housing downtown is on the verge of extinction as building after building evicts long term tenants and converts to short term rentals. Currently, this is an allowed use in the Central Business District. To protect the culture of our downtown, we have to protect our downtown long term rental housing stock. I support bringing STR regulation to downtown. A few years ago I was part of a shared music space downtown, on Chicken Alley. However, we were all asked to leave because the owner wanted to convert the building into a short term rental. My personal story has been repeated over and over and over again. Our downtown is on the verge of being a hollowed out place where almost no one lives - because there are no places to live. Zoning in the CBD needs to change so that it is allowed on a case by case basis, rather than carte blanche.

I’m very much against suburban sprawl. So, the Affordable Housing Bond money should be spent to build affordable housing as close to downtown as possible. That would keep commutes low, enable more people to live without a car (reducing their cost of living) and help make sure that our downtown is still populated by the locals who make it a great place to be.

What is your 5-year vision for Downtown?

I see people getting off of busses and bicycles to walk wide sidewalks, locals working, or just enjoying being there on a day off. A beautiful, active space in front of the Basilica.
Any further comments you’d like to include concerning Downtown Asheville?