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**
Cecil Bothwell

**QUESTION:** Please tell us why you are running for City Council.
I have established a good track record, particularly around environmental issues and hope to continue that work. Climate change represents an existential threat to modern civilization and we need to consider our effect in every decision we make as individuals and as a community.

**QUESTION:** What do you feel are downtown’s most pressing challenges?
Getting people out of their cars is urgent. (I elaborate on this in the transportation question below). Protecting our tree canopy and green spaces is also essential—the “heat island” effect is noticeably regulated by the presence of trees.

**QUESTION:** What is the role of downtown in the greater Asheville community?
Downtown is the cultural focal point, in addition to its obvious role as the seat of governments.

**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?
I’ve learned during my two terms in office that a lot of “strategies” are wishful thinking. We didn’t have to do anything as a municipality to incentivize the recent spate of hotel construction, and some of our incentive programs have been duds (particularly around affordable housing). Looking back, the best thing that happened to preserved Asheville’s character was being deeply in debt through the 1950s and 60s “urban renewal” era and unable to join the rush to “modernize” cities. That paucity of funds preserved so many lovely Art Deco buildings that could very likely have come down, in the same way that North Lexington came close to demolition a while later. I believe our form-based zoning rules are of some help, though we still ended up with the very un-Asheville Aloft and Indigo hotels. I am cautiously in favor of tax increment rebates for businesses that build out and invest in new equipment while creating new jobs with a Living Wage minimum.

**ISSUE:** Supporting local business
**QUESTION:** What strategies would you employ to ensure the sustainability of small locally owned businesses in downtown?
There is very little within the control of a municipal government in NC that helps out local
businesses. We can’t use the tax structure, we can’t dictate who rents what or for what price, we can’t outlaw chain businesses. Mostly we can use moral suasion to encourage people to shop local, and make parking expensive enough that people move along to make room for the next customer. Nationally, I have read recently, Mom and Pop operators are having a great deal of difficulty selling their shops when they want to retire—there aren’t many willing buyers. Meanwhile Amazon enters more and more markets.

**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?

In a very immediate way I am coordinating with Keolis/Navia to convince them to run a demonstration of their driverless bus system here. Autonomous vehicles are going to revolutionize transportation in the next decade. We need a circulator shuttle system that allows visitors to “park once.” At the same time, extending transit beyond City Limit (with cooperation from Buncombe County,) will get people from affordable housing to downtown jobs, cut per capita vehicle emissions, and relieve parking demand. The new parking meters will be fully installed next year and we’ll be able to extend paid hours to at least 10 p.m. which will garner an additional $600,000 which can be invested in transit. At the same time I’ve been advocating for a dual price system when the garage systems are replaced—charging lower rates for Asheville taxpayers and employees of downtown businesses, and higher rates for visitors. Again, we can garner hundreds of thousands of dollars annually from the increase.

**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?

As Chair of the Public Safety Committee, and a member of that body for my entire two terms, I have been “in on” all of the discussions about matters like body-cams, the evidence locker fiasco, racial disparity in enforcement, our use of force policy and more. There is no question that we have allocated sufficient resources to maintain public safety. Crime, overall, has fallen in Asheville and across America in the past decade. At the same time, of course, there are specific areas where crime and violent crime remain a serious problem. I wish I had a solution to the too prevalent experience of young black men killing each other in our housing projects, but I don’t think anyone has found the key. More jobs and a $15 minimum wage would probably help. But police experts say that there is no way to “patrol” our way out of homicide. As to the recent budget conversation, I was disappointed that some people latched onto the idea that there was a $1 million pot of money that could go to the APD or “the people.” That was complete misinformation. In any municipal budget cycle each department will pitch their wishes. Then the give and take begins. That the APD requested an extra million or so didn’t mean that the money was there for the taking ... it was a request. In the end we did what we do every year, we pared down some parts of the budget and increased taxes (to pay for the Bonds approved by voters last November) so that the books balanced.
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. Downtown circulator shuttle. Pay for it with curbside meter hour increase and differential parking garage rates for locals and visitors. Local business will thrive if access is easy.
2. Redevelop the land across from the Civic Center and Basilica as a park. Funding from private donations via a nonprofit entity. Unlike the failed Conservancy effort for Pack Square Park, this entity would set aside money to fund an ongoing maintenance budget/trust fund. (I have formed a nonprofit fully prepared to do this.)
3. Plan for re-purposing Wall Street as a pedestrian mall (with delivery truck hours as needed) and consider the same for Page St. when hotel construction is complete. Move the farmer’s market on Market to Page. Evaluate success and consider other ped-mall streets. It works in other cities.

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?

The core homeless issues are beyond municipal control. We need single-payer universal health care—health crises are the single biggest cause of homelessness in America. And we need a $15 minimum wage. Too many homeless folks are employed but still can’t find affordable housing. The problem, at its core, is wages. The City has done better than any other in NC in funding affordable housing, but we are still way behind the need. The simple fact is that there is no way to buy our way out with housing subsidies. I imagine the 5 year plan will do about as well as the 10 year plan to end homelessness: it will help some, it will not fix the situation. As for the presence of homeless folks downtown, my prediction is that the extremely high value of downtown property will sooner than later convince the Salvation Army, the Rescue Mission, and others to sell for development and relocate. Historically the reason homeless services are located where they are is because downtown died in the 70s when commerce fled to the mall. The real estate equation has flipped.

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?

To be quite clear, I voted against the Affordable Housing Bond. I have been completely unimpressed by the City’s efforts to construct affordable housing during my two terms in office. According to a study done at UNC Chapel Hill, Asheville has done better in terms of the number
of units subsidized than any other city in NC over the past decade or so. What I see is that we have consistently funded affordability with $10-15,000 per unit investments, in exchange for promises of affordability for several years. At the end of the term, the developers cash in, selling or raising rental prices to market rate. We have done better with partnerships with Mountain Housing Opportunities and Habitat for Humanity. The recent deal to site affordable housing on City-owned land opposite the Aston Tennis Courts is promising: we obtained a 50-year promise of affordability and the City will make some money on the lease. It will be interesting to see if the deal works. (A previous, similar project fell through.) While I think we should continue to apportion the Federal dollars we receive, since they are earmarked for community development and affordable housing, I think City dollars would be better spent on transit. Here’s why: Following WWII an economic boom allowed exit to the suburbs, accurately described as “white flight.” Downtowns suffered and those left behind were the poorest. Around the turn of the century downtowns were rediscovered. Money flowed back in, and affordable housing moved out to the margins. So if we want to use our money wisely to help affordability, we need to help people who find affordable housing out in the county, even out of the county, to commute to jobs in the City. Transportation is a very big factor in affordable living, and it is one area where a small municipal government like Asheville can make a significant impact.

If we can’t legally use the Affordable Housing Bond money for transit, I would suggest we not borrow the money at all. (Bonds will not be issued until projects are identified.)

What is your 5-year vision for Downtown?
I expect hotel development to plateau for a while. Occupancy rates are already falling. I think we’ll need to widen the Downtown Business District to include the area north of I-240 to Chestnut St. between Charlotte and Broadway. The onset of autonomous vehicles which the Chairs of Ford and GM see happening in 2021, will allow us to rethink parking in a pretty radical way. I believe we will begin to plan for repurposing our current parking infrastructure. I’m confident that rooftop solar will see very substantial growth on our downtown buildings. It would be my hope that as parking demand begins to subside that we will encourage planting of trees in former surface lots.

Any further comments you’d like to include concerning Downtown Asheville?
The change in Downtown since I moved here in 1980 has been dramatic, and while the pioneer businesses who took an early chance deserve applause, as of course does Julian Price, I think it would be hard to figure out exactly why Downtown boomed. It isn’t as if Asheville is entirely unique. People have rediscovered downtown in many, many cities. Being located in a lovely setting within a reasonable drive of half the national population helps. The aforementioned preservation of Art Deco and other attractive buildings helped. Having a pristine water source clearly attracted brewers. Building parking decks was a good move during the expansion of auto tourism post WWII, though as I’ve indicated above, I believe that new decks would face a time of diminishing demand. As the transit consultant for the Comprehensive Plan study told Council a month ago, “You don’t want to build the last deck,” advice he offers to many cities and
universities. He urges those considering new decks to think more than twice.