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  PRATIK BHAKTA

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

I am running to make a difference. I am passionate about Asheville and want to see our city thrive. However, we need better fiscal responsibility in our budgeting process and we need better accountability for meaningful results. Our spending is accelerating at an unsustainable rate and there still isn’t enough money left in the city budget for areas of our city that need attention. I want to use my experience to help make practical decisions and ensure our city runs efficiently and effectively without neglecting needed services.

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

Parking is the biggest challenge in our downtown. The closer you get to our city center, the worse it gets. Lack of parking in key places only increases traffic in downtown as drivers burn fuel orbiting our streets in search of a space. Having places for people to park on the edges will help alleviate the challenges of pedestrian traffic while providing safer crossings for our citizens and visitors. Developments with parking decks help this effort, as many people just want to walk the streets with a plethora of restaurants, bars and specialty places in a vibrant downtown.

QUESTION: What is the role of downtown in the greater Asheville community?

Downtown Asheville has been revitalized considerably in the past decade. What once was a lackluster area, now people flock to. It’s a great testament to the hard working citizens, and owners who take pride and who have made significant investments in their craft. The atmosphere is truly amazing. It has become the signature piece of the Asheville I am so passionate about.
**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?

Strategic Growth. When developers want to develop in downtown, all things need to be considered. The parking requirements, the infrastructure improvements, the utilities demand, fire safety and emergency demand. With developers wanting to spend millions of dollars in building their project, one has to realize that the property tax base will improve dramatically, as well as potentially creating more jobs, and add also to sales tax revenues. But the design scheme and character also need to be in line with the area. As downtown grows, so will the tax base, and we have different mechanisms in place that will guide growth. Those mechanisms can always be tweaked to enhance the value proposition. We just have to be practical.

**ISSUE:** Supporting local business

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

Local businesses are the heart and soul of our downtown. Businesses have been thriving in downtown in recent years as more and more entrepreneurs want to open up shop to take advantage of the opportunity it provides. We need to support organizations like the Downtown Association in order to create a better way for people to know all the shops and restaurants/venues to drive more traffic to those small locally owned businesses. One idea I have is to create an APP for Asheville. There are plenty of apps for smartphone users, but I think we can create a more intricate one for the businesses for downtown.

**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?

Again, parking decks at strategic places would only enhance the pedestrian traffic. They should also be designed as not to disrupt the harmony or the theme of downtown. Going more green with the transit system will help tremendously, while easing fuel costs for our city.

**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?

This is one department that everyone relies on at one time or another, and they do not receive enough credit for their great work. The hard working men and women that keep us safe are a priority for me. We need to allocate enough funding to make sure they have the tools and training to perform in their duties adequately. And, while I am passionate about our first responders, I won't allow that passion to cause me to overlook wasteful spending. I expect this department to be run as efficiently as any other.
**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. Parking decks (see above)
2. Highest and best use of all city owned property
3. Clean up and recondition/redevelop the sidewalks/streets.

**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?

Homelessness is a tragedy and speaks to one of the three basic necessities in life: Food, Clothing & Shelter. The very first operating principle of Homeless Initiative Advisory Committee’s mission is to advise council and commissioners on prioritization. As a council member, I would help support the various needs of the committee’s goals to end homelessness. Allocating funding & resources is the first step to ensure the needs are met. Second is to engage with the committee on how the funding is being utilized and carried out. Third, is to work with the committee to ensure the outcome is achieved.

**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?

Affordable housing remains a key concern in every city and it certainly is no stranger to Asheville. We have to continually be vigilant on any new development to ask developers to create and allocate units that can sustain affordability. Encouraging them with tax incentives can help drive the initiative, but it is not the only solution. Creating a community culture that supports affordable housing is equally important.

What is your 5-year vision for Downtown?

Asheville has been my home for nearly 33 years. I have seen Asheville grow strategically and not so strategically at times. While we certainly live “in the land of the free,” we have to be practical about our growth. We cannot allow growth to outpace our ability to meet the demand for core services like public safety, traffic, parking, water and the like. I envision a thriving city where locals and tourist feel equally at home. I envision a robust public transportation system that all of us can be proud of. And, I see a downtown that is used as a model for other cities across the nation.
Any further comments you’d like to include concerning Downtown Asheville?

Everything in government is a trade off. There is no endless supply of taxpayer money to fund programs, but we have needs and challenges that no one other than government can or will address. It’s about being PRACTICAL. It’s about carefully and transparently considering all of our options before we make our decisions.