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:** Rich Lee

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

Asheville has a lot of work to catch up on – infrastructure and traffic, housing and wages, to name a few – but it’s clear we don’t have infinite resources or authority as a small, budget-constrained local government. I ran for this seat two years ago as a hard-working pragmatist, someone who knows how to see ideas through the process – progressive, yes, but willing to be strategic about how to move things through the process. Since then I’ve only seen more need for that kind of leadership. I’m a financial planner. I’ve worked as a neighborhood advocate lobbying city government for changes, and as a city commission member working items through the budget, notably the transportation items in the recent municipal bonds. I think the city is looking for leaders that set ambitious goals and have the knowledge and experience to carry them out. That’s why I’m running.

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

I’m most concerned about the threats to our local, independent business community from rising rents, national chains and a struggling local customer base.

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

Downtown is a major employment hub. (My office is downtown, for one.) It’s the star attraction to visitors, relocating businesses and other economic drivers. It has the potential to host both more housing and more middle-class jobs. More than that, it’s an opportunity to show the success of an urban-liberal model, that urban areas can be livable, sustainable and equitable, to a region and state that are frankly hostile to the idea and would love to see us fail.
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?

For starters, I would ask the city to apply for a multiyear, multimillion-dollar tourism development grant to upgrade downtown sidewalks and lighting. I dislike that hotel tax revenues are restricted to public works with a tourism aspect (and I would work with the county to change that,) but here’s an area where tourists’ and locals’ needs overlap. We should pursue it. Additionally, I’ve come to believe that the West Slope past Ann Street should host a public institution (i.e., a college satellite campus) as a way to answer our needs for open public spaces and a new performing arts facility. I would put resources toward planning on the west side toward that goal. As the I-26 Connector proceeds, I would work with DOT to reclaim the current exit ramp right-of-way, millions of dollars worth of property that would otherwise be left vacant, for housing and a westward expansion of downtown.

I support, for now, council’s hotel review, but ultimately I want clear zoning to lead to a better mix of hotels and other uses downtown, rather than an opaque, politicized process. I would continue to urge downtown developers to contribute toward necessary local infrastructure, to use local arts and retailers, and so on. I would use zoning and city economic development funds to help independent businesses stay in place. I would work on traffic fixes, especially pedestrian issues. I would be open to another parking deck.

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

Start with zoning. The next council will oversee the first major zoning revision in almost 20 years. We have an opportunity to write protections into the code – restricting the size/footprint of downtown retail spaces, for example. The city can take the lead in fostering workplace democracy and co-ops and helping independent businesses purchase and own their spaces so they’re not squeezed out by landlords raising rents. Ultimately, plans for another parking garage or redevelopment of city-owned properties like the ABC store on Charlotte Street should include city-owned and -controlled retail space for startup vendors, like 7th Street Public Market in Charlotte.

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 support the city’s new smart meters with surge pricing, another parking garage (though location TBD), and increasing transit frequency and convenience. I was dismayed by the Embassy Suites project on Haywood Street, that lacked enough parking for its own overnight guests and staff, to say nothing of guests of its 150+ occupancy ballroom or the Hyatt Place staff who currently park on that lot. It’s good planning practice to have a low parking requirement for downtown development, to reduce costs and encourage density in the right places. But that one didn’t bother
to accommodate its own needs, expecting to dump its traffic into the surrounding streets’ and businesses’ spaces instead.

**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?

I agree with that NAACP committee that overpolicing of minority residents is a cause for concern. I also agree that the main downtown citations – homeless loitering and substance abuse – would be better addressed with investments in social programs, rather than expecting police to be social workers on top of their other duties. I think putting off expanding the downtown unit was the right call, but now we have to look at how to make a safer environment without the additional officers. I’m committed to supporting the community resources we need to tackle this citywide problem.

**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 lighting: Apply for TDA grant funds immediately, urge downtown developers to contribute for sidewalks, including needed improvements off their properties.
2. Parking: Support smart meter rollout, partner with a downtown development such as the Food Co-op on a joint public/private parking garage, ultimately begin a circulator shuttle from Memorial Stadium for downtown service workers.
3. Public space: Fund through normal capital budget or a future bond.

**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?

I honestly can’t see that anyone has come up with the solution for chronic homelessness in Asheville. One priority of mine is to dedicate affordable housing funds from the recent municipal bond issue to eviction prevention (i.e., from emergency expenses or short-term lapses) in the hope of preventing homelessness and the long-term effects of eviction at their source. I would also be open to forging stronger partnerships with our faith-based ministries to the homeless, including those historically mistrustful of working with the city.

**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?

I believe every neighborhood in Asheville should expect – and welcome – a diverse mix of incomes. I did not support using the Affordable Housing bond money to redevelop the Charlotte Street
Public Works Garage, but I would be open to using it at the ABC Store site or some other downtown site instead. It seems to me the glaring oversight in the city’s affordable housing policy is a lack of support for existing individual landlords who struggle to keep their rents low. About 50% of Asheville housing is rentals, and about 50% of those, or a quarter of all housing units in the city, are so-called “nontraditional” rentals, meaning not apartment complexes but one-off houses and apartments, including many of the units downtown over retail spaces. Many local small-time landlords face pressure to raise rents on their tenants (or else convert to more profitable uses, like condos or vacation rentals.) Yet the city has not found an effective way to support them. I think the legal mechanism exists to give property tax rebates or other grants to these landlords, relieving rent pressures and helping them with their own costs as living as well. That’s a seemingly low-cost solution we haven’t yet explored.

What is your 5-year vision for Downtown?

As I said, I want it to be a model to the state for smart urbanism. I want us to be gaining ground against national trends in gentrification and inequality, problems our sister “hot cities” haven’t been able to crack. I want it to feel easy to get around (especially walking!) and have better access for buses and cars. I think in five years we’ll either have permanently protected our independent business ecosystem or we’ll have lost considerable numbers to national chains. I hope it’s the former. I’d like to still see cranes and construction workers, but building more homes and middle-class businesses. I’d like it to feel like a home – like it is – to those of us who live and work here.

Any further comments you’d like to include concerning Downtown Asheville?

I’ve detailed specific policy proposals and organizing principles on a number of local topics at http://richworksfor.me/issues. I can be reached at info@richworksfor.me