



The Asheville Downtown Association periodically surveys its members and the community to get feedback on issues and challenges facing downtown.

The top issues identified by members to maintain the vibrancy of downtown are: more parking/transportation options, supporting local businesses, maintenance of infrastructure, safety, 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.

I'm running for council because I believe Asheville ought to be doing better for the people of Asheville, starting with making our city's infrastructure more resilient to growth and climate impacts. Our water, stormwater, roads, pedestrian and transit planning are falling behind. Our zoning is out-of-date and long overdue for an overhaul. Wages have lagged behind rising costs of living. To solve these problems I offer my experience working items through city budgets, my deep familiarity with the issues, and my passion for our city and our residents.

QUESTION: Small local businesses are facing even greater challenges due to COVID-19, and several have closed. What strategies would you employ to ensure the sustainability of these businesses in downtown?

Of course, the first thing we need to do is practice safe measures to limit the spread of coronavirus until a vaccine is developed. Earlier this year, working with Transportation and Planning staff, I helped in the development of pedestrian-priority zones and outdoor retail guidelines to help more businesses take advantage of public spaces for seating and displays. Many businesses are still closed or under capacity, though, and with the coming of cold weather, outdoor dining isn't going to be as viable an option. The city needs to step in right now with another round of business grants in conjunction with the county and TDA. We can't wait for the little state and federal stimulus we're going to get. Not if we're going to preserve Asheville's unique and irreplaceable ecosystem of small independent businesses. Over the longer term, we're faced with the problem that the

local customer base (using figures for the Asheville MSA) is both smaller *and* has less disposable income than our surrounding metro areas in Chattanooga, Raleigh, and Charlotte, etc. Diversifying the local economy with higher-paying career-track jobs across a variety of fields is not just good for our people. It's good for building a local clientele with the means to support small businesses through bad times.

QUESTION: What steps would you take to advance racial equity in Asheville? Do you support City Council's recent reparations resolution, and how would you enact reparations?

To answer the second question first, yes, I do support the racial reparations resolution. The resolution itself has drawn fire from both left and right, but I think many of those criticism are in bad faith and don't address what's actually in it, which is a good template for how to move forward: first, push for broader local, state and federal action on reparations; second, acknowledge and apologize for the economic harm of distinct city actions – city support for the policies of segregation, urban renewal programs that claimed Black neighborhoods and business districts, the achievement gap in city schools, and the economic and cultural impacts of discriminatory policing – and last, begin to undo that economic damage. What makes it reparations, rather than just an apology, is the acknowledgment that the economic impacts of slavery, segregation and discrimination can't be corrected just by declaring more equitable policy going forward, and responsibility for them isn't diffuse or even that far in the past. Wealth was literally taken, creating a wealth gap between black and white households that will persist, essentially forever, until it's returned. The resolution puts the city on the hook for a share, not all, directly related to city actions that are not even very far in the past: 40 years or so for urban renewal, to the present day for inequitable education and policing. The resolution calls for a reparations commission and public process to decide how wealth is to be returned, and I support that. I expect, though, a sizeable share to involve a land transfer of some kind from the city back to Black communities in the form of a land trust or something similar. I'm eager to see the commission's process play out, and what they produce.

QUESTION: What is your position on the City's Reimagining Public Safety Initiative? What changes, if any, would you make to the Asheville Police Department and the way it responds to calls for service?

I think the public has clearly spoken that the status quo of policing, in the form of discriminatory targeting of our Black neighbors and disproportionately high violence against them, is no longer acceptable. Not only that, but that continuing to support a heavy-handed, enforcement-centered approach to public safety is not the only path forward, nor necessarily the best one. Data from police records and reporting by AVL Watchdog, among others, suggests that only a small fraction of police business is violent crime needing an armed response. The bulk of calls are nuisance infractions, "crimes of homelessness" like trespassing, vehicle and driving infractions, drug and alcohol possession and the like, where the presence of an armed responder is not only unnecessary but is greatly increasing the chances of escalation and violent conflict. The recent, unfortunate interaction between ALE officers and a mentally-ill passenger on a city bus is a good example.

As someone who worked for years in mental health, often with people who could turn on a dime to self-harm or violence towards others, I want to see those interactions approached by unarmed and trained professionals who can safely de-escalate them without violence. That may mean something like Denver's STAR program or Eugene's CAHOOTS, but I suspect that, unlike those programs, ours will have to operate outside APD's command structure. I do support the goal of reducing the footprint of Asheville Police by 50% through a thorough and responsible analysis and communitywide process. Call it our moon-shot or Manhattan Project. While I understand local activists' calls to cut the police budget immediately and figure out the replacements, if any, afterwards, I don't see the analysis and infrastructure in place. It's going to be a process. I think it's achievable in a way that will increase, not decrease, public safety across the community. I don't think the difficulty should dissuade us.

QUESTION: What do you feel is downtown's most pressing challenge, and how would you address it?

A working downtown needs to support the whole spectrum of businesses and residents, from the lowest- to highest-income. We're losing that, and it shows. Too many businesses are dependent on tourism for revenue – there isn't a strong enough base of local consumers to support them. This problem is most visible with retail businesses and restaurants, but I'm also concerned about the loss of downtown office space with the sale of the Flatiron and the low interest in offices downtown in general.

My first step as a city council member will be to initiate a total overhaul of the UDO, our zoning. There's no reason a city growing this fast should be operating under zoning from 20 years ago. The new zoning will increase density on transit corridors and protect areas where streets and other public facilities are already overloaded. As part of this process, we will implement restrictions like maximum retail footprint in the downtown core, meant to protect local independents. We will explore city-owned locations like Haywood Street for a true Public Market – vendor stalls and small pop-up business locations, similar to Seventh Street Market in Charlotte – for small entrepreneurs to workshop ideas before making the leap to brick-and-mortar. New rules would require more robust tree protection and planting, creating shade and relief from the heat-island effect in the core. Next, but not last, we'll make sure to get the land decommissioned by NC DOT when it reroutes I-240 back into public use, and use those dozens of newly available acres to create affordable housing, a business district, and even a satellite college campus with student housing, extending downtown all the way to the river and Hillcrest.

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

As a downtown worker, I see a lot of potential in the empty surface parking lots of Asheland and Coxe, and the area of downtown west of Ann St. These are natural extensions of downtown, places that young urban workers would love to live, that would alleviate demand on arterial roads like Patton, Hendersonville, Merrimon and I-240. On council, I would support a land value tax or use tax that disincentivizes sitting on empty lots. I would invest in parks, streetscape, trees and

public arts and artists downtown, creating beautiful spaces and experiences that recoup their cost by making their surroundings more appealing and valuable. I would – and do – support a downtown circulator shuttle connecting to parking, the River Arts District, and West Asheville, funded by hotel room taxes, and I believe this can happen. I would listen to the needs of downtown residents and business owners when it comes to how to spend public dollars in the core, and will support participatory budgeting to put more of those spending decisions in the public's hands.

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?

As chair of the city's Multimodal Transportation Commission, I've been deeply involved in these issues. Transit is not for everybody, but it's the cheapest investment in reducing parking demand. The research shows that most people will opt for public transit instead of their personal vehicle when buses operate on a frequency on a 15-minute or less schedule. That's what I have been working toward on the Commission, and we are in the midst of the multi-year implementation plan. The goal: high frequency on most major roads by 2024. That means funding years 2-10 of the Transit Master Plan on a rapid, sustainable schedule. I would support an additional parking garage, if the right location comes up and it can be financed like our previous efforts. I will push for park-and-ride rapid bus service and countywide transit expansion for the 30,000+ workers who live outside city limits and commute into the city every day for work. That's going to take a significant investment by Buncombe County Government, and we're on track to make that happen.

ISSUE: Supporting local business

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

The biggest issues I'm hearing from local small business owners downtown are rising rents and being displaced by national chains and hotels; high costs of starting up; and other barriers such as inconsistent permitting processes and external issues like a lack of adequate public parking or city public works (on sidewalks, streets, water lines) disrupting business.

Rising rents/displacement: We can't prevent property owners from selling. But we can remove the easy incentive to sell to hotel developers or national chains through modernized zoning that restricts certain types of development and encourages a more diversified local economy. We can help more local business owners to own their own properties with the city's array of incentives, and provide city-managed incubator spaces and market stalls downtown for entrepreneurs to test and refine ideas before making the leap to real estate.

Inconsistent permitting and city disruptions: The city is slowly making progress on this front, but there are still too many stories of business openings being delayed or extra costs incurred by problems with the permitting office. On council, I would continue to support these reforms, and work to make sure to inform and support businesses affected by sidewalk or road closures.

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.) Sidewalk repair and streetscape. Considering downtown's role as a tourist draw and economic driver, it's surprising how poor the quality of downtown streetscapes are. This is an easy project for hotel-tax dollars, and I would encourage the TDA through appointments and public pressure to leverage future years' hotel taxes into bonds, to begin a major streetscape overhaul right away. Some work has begun on Haywood Street, but it's long overdue
- 2.) Trees. Recent research shows a startling loss of tree canopy in downtown and adjoining low-income neighborhoods. This loss is contributing to a heat-island effect. It increases runoff and particulates in the air. It makes the experience of moving about the city, especially downtown, less welcoming and pleasant. I would revise zoning to require tree protection from developers, and replacement of felled trees with mature trees when necessary. Where trees are being prevented by DOT rules, like sidewalk trees on Patton Ave, I would work with the DOT and lower speed limits to allow more trees to be planted. I would press Duke to change its topping practices along power lines. Making Asheville "Tree City" would mean a healthier, more vibrant, more livable city for all of us. We need to do better.
- 3.) Parking. Recent studies show there is available parking in downtown at all hours, but finding it is a drag for many, even with new apps and signs, and a widespread perception persists in the Asheville area that downtown is crowded and inconvenient to park in. New lots at the Buncombe County Health Department and transit center go underused, inconveniently located for downtown workers and shoppers alike. Late-hours service workers still share common concerns about walking to far-flung streets across I-240 after dark to retrieve their cars. I do believe there is evidence supporting a new city parking deck and, more critically, for partnerships with developers similar to the Aloft Hotel deck. On council I would pursue these partnerships, reject hotels that suck up public spaces, and improve wayfinding and other visual cues for parking. I would improve walking infrastructure and push for hotel-tax funding for a circulator shuttle, so more people can comfortably use farther-out parking lots, and I'd fight the impression that downtown is closed off to locals by instituting local discounts for parking decks and meters.

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 ensure community trust in policing?

The first thing the Asheville Police Department needs is clear standards and expectations for its officers, and that comes from the chief down. Second is stability. No interest is served by the constant turnover and turmoil at the department, least of all the at-risk communities currently experiencing a wave of violence unlike any in recent memory. From the perspective of what council can accomplish, that means supporting the new chief with resources to professionalize the department and tamp down its internal drama, and to enforce our high standards and

expectations for officers. My standards include de-escalation in every possible interaction, sensitivity and a problem-solving approach with our houseless population, implementing consent searches, training in implicit bias, training in response to mental health crises and medical crises, transparency, and a community policing approach for all officers regardless of their duty station. A consistent community policing approach would mean a commitment to collaboration between the police and the community that identifies and solves community problems -- together. That can build trust.

ISSUE: Homelessness

QUESTION: What steps would you take to support the Homeless Initiative Advisory Committee and Asheville's homeless resource providers? What other strategies or initiatives would you consider to address homelessness in our community?

I support the city's housing-first-and-wraparound-services approach to homelessness, and think these efforts should be continued and strengthened. I'm encouraged that nearly a hundred units of housing for the houseless are set to come online in 2020-21, giving some relief to about half of the current chronically-houseless population. Again these are efforts that deserve more resources, and I'm concerned about what seems like the city's historically low support for faith-based efforts.

Ultimately, addressing this issue means tackling the causes. That means more affordable housing. Better wages for workers. Protections from renters and homebuyers from discrimination on the basis of housing vouchers, credit scores, criminal history, race, age and sexual orientation. Providing education equity, which requires closing the school achievement gap. It's a comprehensive set of goals, but one we could make progress on with the right advocate. I believe my experience and ability makes me that person.

ISSUE: Affordable/Workforce Housing

QUESTION: What is your position on housing diversity in downtown? What other strategies would you like to see our city develop to address the affordability issue?

I believe in housing diversity for a host of reasons. First, it is equitable to have housing at different price points so that people of all incomes can live in downtown, which includes many civic and cultural assets. And mixing incomes causes better outcomes across the board. However, without considerable city incentives, it seems unlikely the market will create housing affordable at the lowest incomes in the core, and even the remaining apartments at the lower end of the scale are rapidly turning over and owners are raising rents.

I believe we have a few opportunities:

1. City-owned land. I don't think moving the city-owned public works garage to create housing is a sensible option. But the ABC store property at Charlotte and Biltmore, the Lee Walker Heights and old Ford properties, and the Aston Park properties on Hilliard present opportunities. The city could lease or give the properties to private housing developers on a condition of affordable rents, or manage building housing on them itself.

2. Extending downtown. People will laugh, but this next council will realize a once-in-a-century opportunity if we manage to reclaim dozens of acres of land on the west slope of downtown when I-240/I-26 is realigned in a few years. The DOT's preference is for the decommissioned spaghetti of exit ramps to stay under state control, but if we're able to put that land to public use, it can be an instant, unheard-of 50% expansion of downtown, all the way to the river, Hillcrest and Chicken Hill. It can be housing, offices, new retail and arts spaces. It can be -
3. A satellite college campus. If all other efforts fail, there's one last option for housing diversity downtown: student housing. It's no secret UNC Asheville has eyed expansions down Broadway and into downtown. Western Carolina, NC State, and other state universities may be similarly inclined. Student housing would be, de facto, low-income, younger than the average downtown demographic, arts-supporting and local-business-oriented. Cities with urban campuses score higher on measures of income and racial diversity, and serve as a bulwark against gentrification. A satellite campus could even include the performing arts spaces, galleries, and civic plazas we need more of downtown. On council, I would coordinate closely with UNCA and others on their expansion plans, and facilitate them with all the city tools available.

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

I'm excited to talk more about Public Art, innovation districts, special funding districts and using bonds to fund improvements rapidly in the face of skyrocketing construction costs. I think the resolution we need to the hotel moratorium is sensible zoning that puts housing and office construction ahead of hotels in developers' minds. On council, I'll be eager to work with business owners and residents to resolve longstanding concerns about street closures and create true pedestrian districts. At the same time, it's vitally important that downtown businesses reflect and welcome the diversity of Asheville's population, with minority-owned businesses and a range of local independent goods and services creating a true sense of home, of being Asheville's downtown, a downtown for everybody. If you have specific ideas about downtown, please share them through the contact form at www.richleeforasheville.com. I'm excited to hear from you.