



Downtown Issues Questionnaire for Asheville City Council Candidates

YOUR NAME: Sage Turner

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

I love this city. We are surrounded by beautiful mountains and filled with incredible, passionate people. I moved here twenty years ago to start a family and to join a community where everyone can feel welcome.

As we've grown and become an international tourist destination, we're losing some of our culture and losing some of the people who make Asheville so special, and this worries me. I see fewer locals downtown, I hear many say they can no longer afford to live here, that opportunities are closing, and our economy isn't flourishing for everyone. In the next decade, we'll face even more growth as climate changes and families relocate here

to higher ground.

I'm running for Asheville City Council because I can help. If elected, I will use my experience with planning and community building to work on these issues, to grow our community in ways that restore our arts and culture, lift up our vulnerable families, protect our roots, and ensure our children will inherit a healthy community that welcomes and cares for all.

My priorities are accessible affordable housing and equity, education and environmental justice, responsible smart growth, and growing our local business economy.

ISSUE: Supporting Local Business

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?

Slow and steady reboot. Supporting a safe return of visitors, creating special space for locals, and slowly, steadily, and safely rebuilding will best ensure we protect lives and reduce the spread of COVID. About 80 businesses are utilizing new, COVID-related public space tools like sidewalk dining, parking space dining, curbside pickup parking spots, outdoor gathering space, etc. It is imperative we provide transitional support for cold weather options. We will need to adapt and readapt as we recover from COVID-19.

Advocacy. Legislators and local leaders are administering assistance packages and bills. Restaurants have partnered up to try to push forward bills to specifically help restaurants. The PPP and EIDL were federally backed programs rolled out early and have helped with sustaining through COVID. The One Buncombe Fund and CVB distribution were local programs. I'd like to

see us do another round of both federal and local programs. I will advocate every chance I can. I helped One Buncombe raise money and advocated for the tourism investment in locals. I also helped many small businesses navigate unemployment, PPP applications, reopening phases, and more.

To truly sustain businesses for the long term in downtown, a consistent and predictable revenue model is needed. We need a strong residential population in downtown, across all incomes.

ISSUE: Racial Justice

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?

I do support the recent reparations resolution and I believe we owe our community more than just words on paper. We need to focus on repairing past decisions and restoring wealth to Black Ashevilleans. Without a large federal bill to support sweeping moves and funding, cities like Asheville will have to strategize and work steadily.

Black Asheville is suffering in several ways and has been denied equity in education, housing, policing, business ownership, and access. Each area needs substantial work.

In downtown, efforts can start with renaming streets and removing monuments that are racially charged and historically offensive. These processes are underway and will take time.

Efforts are also underway to reimagine public safety, which will include extending written consent to search to pedestrians. This will aid in the reduction of racial profiling. Reimagine public safety will also reroute funding to programs that support reform and help lift people out of cycles of poverty, addiction, and criminal activity.

In real estate, we need to look to the city owned land on S. Charlotte St. There was once a bustling Black business district in that area and we can continue work to restore it, utilizing our city owned assets to leverage participation and partnerships. We can also focus on home ownership via the Land Trust (recently launched), Down Payment Assistance Program (\$1.4M about to launch), land banking monies (\$3M yet to be spent), and ensure that all future projects subsidized by the city include voucher acceptance. We return 1/2 of all issued vouchers annually due to lack of units that accept them. A new program from THRIVE AVL pairs landlords with voucher holders to help decentralize poverty.

There are neighborhoods at risk of gentrification and they need protection to spare community members from being priced out. To protect neighborhoods, we need to focus our population growth on dense, new buildings along major corridors with existing infrastructure. In areas near large projects, like RAD and it's growing changes, we need to support more homeownership to protect residents in surrounding neighborhoods.

Asheville has the highest disparity in school suspensions between Black and White youth in the entire state of NC. We are fast-tracking our Black children from school to prison and it must stop. We also have the largest education gap in middle school Black and White children, despite having the largest per capita funding in the state. It's about what happens at and outside of school and we owe our kids better opportunities for their futures.

ISSUE: Safety

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?

Reimagining Public Safety

I support analyzing and changing the way we provide public safety. This can be done with a steady approach, learning and adapting as we go, and continuing to keep residents safe as we adapt. As a city we need to realize that people need more help. We need to invest in services that solve or mitigate our problems, not perpetuate them and continue to put lives at risk. For many, including myself, we are still learning about policing and the culture and history of it.

As a city, we have a disproportionate amount of traffic stops and arrests of Black Asheville community members than White. Traffic stops are also leading to arrests for minor infractions, and those arrests are often enough to upend lives, placing jobs and family obligations at risk. We recently adopted a consent to search policy for vehicles and this should be amended or created to include pedestrians. I'd also like us to look at programming and job opportunities to aid in small vehicle maintenance including inspections, regular maintenance, registration assistance, and driver's rights. Other cities have nonprofits with these programs.

It makes sense for mental health crises to be met with mental health services and specialists instead of armed officers, and for addiction-related issues to be met with assistance from specially trained personnel and programs, and for homeless community members to be assisted by transition and housing specialists. Right now, police officers are tasked with these services. We need to establish community partners and capacity building funding so that we can provide the right assistance at the right time. This is doable with time and prioritization. We can also redirect resources and focus on the intensive, cost-effective training needed to enable the day-to-day performance we expect from law enforcement: effective de-escalation, anti bias, cultural sensitivity, early recognition of PTSD.

I also want us to review our procedures and spending on militarizing officers. Donning riot gear and using tear gas and rubber bullets on people is not what we want from our police. Training for, storage of, replenishing inventory of, etc. also costs us money, time, and energy.

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 chair the Downtown Commission and its Parking and Transportation Committee. A group of us volunteered and created the Downtown Census, the first survey issued to downtown businesses that identified our demographics and needs. Before COVID, parking issues are at the top of all of our survey results. During COVID, business owners voted in support of using parking for outdoor dining and pick up locations. We're still studying the impacts on parking but below is information from before COVID:

33% of downtown workers are parking in metered spaces. This costs workers money, reduces available spaces for customers, and increases congestion from circling drivers.

We need the circulator shuttle that is prescribed in the Transit Master Plan and Downtown Master Plan. We need a parking deck vacancy digital sign for the Civic Center deck; the traffic backs up for blocks without it. We need to implement the new parking spaces found in the Parking Crawl. We need bike share, more bike lanes, more crosswalks, and alternative modes of transportation. We need rideshare drop zones. We need extended transit hours to support later shift workers. We need loading zones to convert to metered spaces at the end of the day. We need sidewalks repaired. We need demand-based meters. We need education on space availability, including new radio commercials and partnerships with CVB for wayfinding. We need to complete a framework for new developers to explore partnership for new parking spaces. Each will help a little; all will help a lot.

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?

We need more 24-hour restrooms, a workforce shuttle, and investments in walkability. All of these qualify under the current lodging tax legislation and should be focused on in the TMIP - Tourism Management & Investment Plan. I am a member of the Leadership Council for the TMIP, a 10-year plan for amending the lodging tax ratio and expanding the definition of capital projects that can be funded. These items are on the suggested project list.

COVID taught us something interesting about tourism taxes and advertising spending. Since mid March, the CVB has run only five days of ads. Despite effectively ending all advertising, occupancy numbers have climbed to almost a full return. As of September, weekends were achieving a 73% occupancy and weekdays almost 60%. PreCOVID, our numbers were in the mid to high eighties. We do not need to spend \$19M a year advertising to attract visitors; let's redirect more monies locally.

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?

In response to COVID-19, the city of Asheville partnered with Homeward Bound and created a temporary shelter for 50 homeless and high risk community members at the Civic Center. The shelter later moved to the Red Roof Inn in West Asheville and continues today. \$615,000 in CARES Act funding was distributed to Asheville and used in partnership with Homeward Bound (\$200k) and Pisgah Legal (\$200k) for both preventing homelessness and providing rental assistance, respectively. We will learn from these programs and be able to better understand and consider more reformative changes and funding strategies for housing first models and assistance programs.

HIAC and AHAC - Affordable Housing Advisory Committee - reviewed an issue in recent years that continues to need education and reform. Approximately half of all housing vouchers issued are returned each year because there are not enough units that accept vouchers on the market. That has meant as much as \$2M in existing, funded, rental assistance going unused. We need more units that accept vouchers.

We need transitional housing solutions that assist vulnerable community members in getting back on their feet after experiencing homelessness, addiction, or medical care. Wraparound services can help individuals succeed. There are deeply affordable housing models and partners we can work with to help create and expand these services locally.

For working class folks, our market is missing townhomes and condos, walkups and lofts. These are small footprint models that can maintain lower price points over time, serve as great foundational first home purchases, and help build equity and credit for young families and young professionals in accessible areas. Vouchers can also be used to pay mortgages; we need to understand and correct why our market does not produce these models.

Some good news. The city recently tied our city funded subsidies to requiring voucher acceptance. With time, more of these units will be produced.

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?

With all the talk of hotels, it may surprise some to hear this, but downtown Asheville is experiencing a successful and strong start to an urban community with housing and residential diversity. In 2019, I delivered a presentation to the Downtown Commission that shared this info:

- There are 1,272 residences (42%)
- 1,728 hotel rooms (58%)

Since presenting it, the large residential complex on Coxe and Asheland has been approved. When built, the % of lodging to residential in downtown will balance out at 50/50%, with hotel rooms and residences equaling each other in quantity and 33% of the housing considered affordable. This is a healthier mix and a solid base. The more residential units the better. If we continue to produce housing faster than or concurrently with lodging and with 20-30% affordable in downtown, we'll maintain a healthy balance.

As for programs:

- We need the County to partner with the City and create a similar LUIG - Land Use Incentive Grant - program to Asheville's which helps create affordability by refunding property taxes.
- We need to ensure the city owned land on S. Charlotte includes housing when developed and includes affordable units.
- We need the 319 Biltmore site (currently in RFP mode), to produce several hundred apartments with 30% of units affordable.
- The 363 Hilliard project has stalled and was looking at a half market rate, half affordable model; let's encourage it and support it when it returns.
- Let's encourage hotel floor plans to include kitchens for easier conversion to housing in the future. One quarter of the existing housing units in downtown were once hotel rooms. (325 of 1,272 units)
- Let's allow STRs in projects that create half STR and half affordable apartments for rent or sale at 60-80% AMI.
- Draft hotel guidelines include a community benefits agreement, in particular a points system to encourage either building or funding affordable housing. Let's focus potential

in lieu affordable housing dollars on affordability in downtown, the same district that produces the funding.

- Part of building a strong residential downtown includes listening to and supporting residents and their changing needs.
- Let's create a stronger link between our University and Downtown and create a long term plan to build a new library.

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

Downtown Asheville is everyone's backyard. It's the business hub of five counties, home to 1,400 residents, home to hundreds of local businesses, and provider of jobs to thousands of workers. Thanks to the ADA, Downtown Asheville hosts the largest, most diverse community gatherings including July 4th, the Holiday Parade, and DA5. We need to continue reopening safely and rebuilding with a focus on strengthening our local businesses, artists, musicians, etc., and on building more resilient models. The Downtown Commission and DARN have been targeting increased residential neighbors in downtown as a primary goal for several years; let's identify projects and areas that we support and try to make them happen. We need more urban neighbors.