

Climate Action Alliance of the Valley
2020 City Council Candidate Questionnaire Responses

1. Do you support the 50x25 campaign? Yes.

2. How would you implement the 3 goals of the 50x25 campaign?

As requested from ongoing discussions with a number of constituents, I have asked City Staff to review the goals and let me know if they see any complications to Council endorsing the campaign. This review was already secondary to the annual budget process, and is now also behind addressing Covid-19 related issues. However, I discussed this with the City Attorney earlier this week, and we are hopeful we can keep this review moving and completed by the end of May. My intention is to bring this before Council once the review is complete.

As far as implementation, regarding Goal 1 I know there has been a great deal of review of the existing supply contract between HEC and Dominion Power. I am aware of an argument that HEC, especially if directed by Council, can take some unilateral action to force things in the desired direction. While I have a law degree and am not entirely unfamiliar with this area of the law, I also know from experience that people who have reached their own conclusion on this may not just take my word for it that things are unlikely to be that simple. My view is that what people are reviewing includes longstanding boilerplate language in lengthy agreements that were written with different circumstances and goals in mind than what we are looking at in the current world. In short, the more confidence anyone proclaims as to predictions on the legal issues, regardless of what those predictions are, the less confidence I have in the predictions. That is not to say I do not support pursuing the goal, because I do. In fact, it is another area where I have initiated current review by City Staff.

Goal 2 is more in the bailiwick of our Public Works Department. However, this may be less about near term staff review and more about how it fits in with processes already in place. On January 14 of this year, the City adopted an Environmental Action Plan. I won't begin to repeat all of the relevant parts here. For anyone not already familiar with it, it's available online and should make interesting reading for those who care about in these issues, especially if they are not already familiar with it. Since further comment on Goal 2 dovetails with the part of my response to Question 3 regarding implementation issues, I won't repeat that here.

Goal 3 is likely to require efforts by both Public Works and HEC. Again, this is addressed generally in Phase 1 of the Environmental Action Plan and will be addressed in the Phase 2 process I outline in response to the next question. I will say that my sense is if there is an area where there may be low hanging fruit, it is this one. Details on specific recommendations are still to be determined, but this is an area it looks like our community has largely ignored. While this could definitely run into Covid-19 generated fiscal challenges, there is also the potential of low or no cost strategies to communicate and support assistance to City residents.

This may be the time to clarify that in a Covid-19 world any actions of any kind requiring new money are going to be a major challenge. The circumstances that will make this not be true are a quicker than expected economic recovery, or relevant federal relief. Anyone who disputes this is either ignoring the facts or has information I deeply hope they will share with me.

3. What would you do to increase or facilitate the adoption of renewable energies or solar in City and School buildings?

I refer again to the Plan adopted by Council on January 14 of this year, the formal name of which is Phase I of the Environmental Action Plan. Focus Area 1 of the Plan is “Buildings and Energy.” Goals 3 and 4 of the Plan speak directly to this question. These issues have already been identified as priorities for the City and have been affirmed through a thorough process that reflects approval and buy in by EPSAC (the City’s Environmental Performance Standards Advisory Committee), Staff and Council.

So, if there is a Phase 1, is there a Phase 2? Absolutely. Phase 2 will focus on implementation, both as to strategies and developing specific policies. Absent a pandemic, more forward movement on Phase 2 would have already occurred. I will say this. My personal view is that this is less about what flashy concept I (or any other candidate) can articulate in this moment, and more about recognizing we have a process in place that is utilizing some of the best minds in the City on these subjects to make reality out of things Council has already endorsed. This most definitely includes “facilitating the adoption of renewable energies or solar in City and School buildings.”

4. How would you prioritize city and state resources for addressing environmental justice concerns, specifically energy efficiency for low income housing?

Let me first say that everything I say below is based on the assumption that funding would be from local dollars. If we’re talking about grant funding, that’s a different world. Our Staff is constantly on the lookout for opportunities in this area. Moreover, in the event there eventually is any federal Covid-19 relief, based on past examples it would not be surprising if it came in the form of grant opportunities, rather than general aid. In short, for these types of opportunities where grant funding becomes available, assume the City will pursue them.

Otherwise, if I understand the question correctly, it illustrates a tension I see that people are often unaware of in posing fiscal questions. My assumption is that this is driven by folks analogizing to things they know, which in this case is how they approach their own budgets, and what they know of how the Feds do it.

I have come to the view that what is most important about understanding local government finance is the ways that it is NOT like our personal or the federal budget. Framing the question as being about priorities is a federal mindset. That’s what they do. They fund large categories, often very generally. So, knowing how much is spent on education, versus defense, versus social programs, etc., and observing changes over time, can be very informative.

Local government finance is not like this at all. The vast majority of what we fund are core services that we don’t have the option of not providing, from education to infrastructure to

mandated social services. Moreover, something people often miss by comparing us to their personal budgets, is that we aren't just required to provide these services. We are usually mandated heavily as to how we provide them, which can drastically limit things like flexibility and efforts to economize.

As a result, our budget focus is not on weighing priorities among large general categories. Ours is on identifying the anticipated cost of providing specific services we are required to or otherwise intend to provide, and then finding the money to make this happen. As a result, we often get interesting inquiries from constituents about our priorities, when all they have done is look at the budget and say, "You increased spending for _____, and decreased it for _____, and I don't like that." Another favorite is, "Why does your budget only spend ___% on _____, while [someplace else] spends more?" In fact, the words are usually stronger than, "I don't like that." Things like basic intelligence and integrity are sometimes called into question.

A good example came up in one of the Great Recession years. I spoke with an irate constituent, who could not believe that we had significantly increased the Parks and Rec budget, while decreasing it for the Fire Department. He felt a little better when I was able to communicate that the Parks and Rec increase was largely due to it being the first full year operations at the Simms Rec Center were included, and that the Fire Department decrease was simply due to senior staff retiring and being replaced by people who were paid less.

So, where would promoting energy efficiency for low income housing fit into traditional notions of core services? It's not really obvious where it does, but probably somewhere in Public Works as a best guess. Again, the feds fund large categories of things to do what it perceives to be good stuff. Same with the state. Local government, not so much. That does not mean we would ignore this issue. We like doing good stuff. We are not, however, traditionally structured to be deep pockets for things that get much beyond core services.

And to stay on my soapbox a bit longer, I perceive increasing public interest, if not demands, for non-core services from local government, and see this as a reflection of decades of leadership dysfunction, if not outright abdication, at the federal and state level. There are definitely good things that come from people being engaged at the local level, be it in issues such as the ones raised here or otherwise. However, I find myself thinking more and more that if I was observing from Mars, I would wonder why you have all these localities scrambling to address these issues on their own. Their resources are limited, and their scope does not move beyond borders that are close by. Moreover, it seems like what they're good at, in fact what they're designed to do, is more like implementation of policy set at higher levels. So, we end up with activism at the local level being a major driver for policy, when what comes from the higher levels is nothing or things that make the situation worse. Which we will support and continue to do, especially when leadership and direction from above is lacking. But it really is a less than optimal way of addressing these issues.

Heck, might as well keep the rant going. I am on a body called the LGAC, which is the Local Government Advisory Committee to the Chesapeake Bay Executive Council. This

committee is exactly what it sounds like. It is made up of local government officials from the 7 jurisdictions that make up the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Its function is to advise the Executive Council (the 6 Governors and Mayor of the 7 member jurisdictions) on Bay policy with an emphasis on the impact on local governments. Among its activities, it produces annual recommendations to the Executive Council. So, what is a major running theme of that group? Someone noticed that going back 20 years something that was on the list most every year, usually as the first item, was about the failure to appreciate just how hard it is on local governments to be given increased mandates to do more stuff (often really good stuff), when it never seems to come with any funding.

I bring this up simply to point out that local governments catch it from the top down and the bottom up, in the sense that it is convenient for people to believe we can always handle one more thing. Especially if it does good and doesn't cost THAT much money. I do see the bottom up pressure as less of an issue, since that is at least coming from the people who will be paying for the increased expense. I also believe many if not most in our community are generally willing to take on some additional financial burden to promote things they support, such as environmental justice concerns. However, over the near term anything that requires new revenue is going to be on hold. Even in the rosy scenario, we will be spending the next few months coming to grips with how to keep our books balanced (which we are required by law to do) and core services functioning in light of major reductions in revenue.

On the specific question, in short there are 2 ways to do it. Top down would be that Council votes to do something along these lines. Of course, that runs into the challenge, especially now, that you would need to directly articulate how you find the funds to do it. Bottom up would be that a City Department finds a way to get funding for something like this into what becomes an approved budget.

5. What do you think about recycling?

How much time do you have?

First, I have nothing but good things to say about how Staff has stepped up to deal with our solid waste issues. I assume most everyone reading this knows the recent history. For a number of years, Harrisonburg was able to utilize a single stream system. One effect of this was to replace a long standing voluntary curbside recycling program.

Of course, what was a limited market for many recyclable plastics became literally no market. With no advance notice, we were told by the company that was taking our solid waste that they simply were not going to service us anymore. We literally had to redesign our solid waste management on the fly. I can say with confidence that if there was one aspect of this where Council spoke clearly to Staff, it was that however we moved forward, we wanted the recycling issue to remain at the forefront.

That has led to our recycling program in its current form. Is it everything we desire? No. Does it reflect prioritized attention and constant openness and flexibility regarding program improvements? It does.

An interesting aside is that recent data shows we have reached the point where our recycling levels now exceed what we had during the old voluntary curbside program. This reflects very well on our community. It also probably reflects some changes in the community. But it brings to mind some interesting push back I received when we stopped curbside recycling. I cannot attribute this to anything other than the virtuousness felt by many of us who did curbside recycling. I literally had people come to me asking us to reinstate it, and insisting that everything was going into a landfill or was otherwise not as advertised with the single stream program. The fact is, when that program was functioning, it was functioning very well. Our recycling numbers were well ahead of anything we ever achieved with the curbside program, or where we are now.

Which brings me to my soapbox moment for this question. This is a pretty serious issue, particularly as it pertains to plastics. We clipped along for years, especially when we put things in a recycling bin, confident that the plastic fairies were taking it all away to a good place where it got “recycled.” How exactly did it get recycled? For most of us, the answer was, “I don’t know, it just gets recycled.”

What a lot of it actually did was end up in China, because that was the market where someone was willing to pay at least a few pennies for it. There aren’t many of us who would have thought it was OK for it to end up in a Chinese landfill, the Pacific Ocean, or maybe being burned over there where any near-term effects of the fumes would be their problem.

So, when the scab got ripped off of this, many of us discovered that our assumptions about what happened to recycled plastics were wrong and had been wrong for years. Why? Because mythology notwithstanding, under the current market structure it is still incredibly cheap to produce the next plastic package. By comparison, it is expensive (absent some still small-scale creative uses that have been devised in some areas) to repurpose an existing piece of plastic, if it is even possible to find any use for it.

To me the depth of this challenge is illustrated by something a lot of us know, the Green New Deal. What is the standard critique of the Green New Deal? OK, it’s not like I agree with it, but you hear things like too aspirational, not practical, and definitely that it’s too expensive to implement. My point is this. In what’s held up as a significant progressive statement on where we need to go, what does it say about plastics and other solid waste management challenges? Other than what you might infer generally, nothing.

Which is interesting, because it may not be rocket science. What would you do from a policy standpoint if you have too much of something undesirable being produced (driven by low costs of production), and too little of countervailing efforts? Wouldn’t you tax the one (and couldn’t you do worse than just point out that this production is imposing costs on the larger society where it needs to stop getting a free ride), subsidize the other, or maybe do both?

Anyway, I find it interesting that the only place I’ve found where this even gets discussed a little bit is with the LGAC group. Local governments down in the trenches know this is an issue, even if others continue to ignore it. Of course, local governments in Virginia do not have the authority to tax manufacturers or the resources to give significant subsidies to alternatives.

In the meantime, we will continue our commitment to doing what we can, and trying to improve whenever we can, in the current environment.

6. Is there anything Harrisonburg can do to reduce transportation emissions, the largest sector of climate change emissions in Virginia and the United States?

I again refer to our Environmental Action Plan. Focus Area 4, Sustainable Transportation, speaks to this in some detail. And to recap, the adoption of Phase 1 of the Plan affirms the City's commitment to this goal. Phase 2 will be the deep dive into specific actions and strategies to implement the Phase 1 goals and values. So, I will again suggest that what is more important to the City is supporting a process that many have worked hard to put into place, than to focus on anything flashy or passionate that I (or any other candidate) might articulate in the moment.

I will conclude with a final point that flows from this but has not been mentioned. The City's current draft budget for 2020-2021 is essentially the 2019-2020 budget, with a short list of changes we know will happen or that reflect particular priorities, and subject to what will almost certainly be significant Covid-19 driven revisions as our actual revenue shortfalls becomes clearer.

I bring this up because the very short list of additions includes funding for a greenhouse gas assessment recommended by the Environmental Action Plan. One of the things we keep running into in reviewing the best thinking in these areas is that while it's great to promote this or that innovative idea, if you haven't taken inventory of your community, you are in some sense flying blind. Sure, most anything you promote that looks like it will do some good will probably do some good. But if we want to be effective, which seems especially important if we are going to be challenged to come up with new money in the next or even next few budget cycles, we can use all the insight we can get into what we are actually accomplishing.

While I very much hope funding for the study will survive the budget challenges of the coming year, it's worth noting that things which have been identified as priorities tend to stay that way. So, even if timing turns out to be an issue, the fact is Council is poised to affirm that getting this study done is a priority over numerous other things the City could be doing.