

PURPOSE:

I am applying to serve on the Asheville Planning and Zoning Commission largely because I'm already doing the work. I've become increasingly involved as a citizen volunteer with the city's planning efforts over the last four years. A diverse array of people have encouraged me to apply for this position -- not just community activists, but also small-business owners, city planners, and most recently the outgoing P&Z chair. I've consistently advocated for fair and equal representation in development decisions that concern neighborhoods, the historic-preservation community, and environmentalists (including Asheville's burgeoning "green" business sector), and I am in close touch with all of these communities.

At the same time, however, I am neither financially nor ideologically beholden to any special interest. I have politely dodged requests to serve on the boards of Asheville's most influential environmental and neighborhood advocacy organizations, and I'm not an official member of any of them (although I participate frequently in their discussions). I've tried to avoid tying myself to any one group, not just because I already have my hands full co-running a religious non-profit and juggling professional web-design work, but also because I feel obligated by my spiritual vows to cultivate an independent, holistic, and open-minded focus on the big picture: Better the world by helping make the city I've loved for 17 years ever more just, joyous, and sustainable.

That requires avoiding black-and-white, pro- vs. anti-development thinking. Instead, I would say I try always to think green.

BACKGROUND:

Bio: I was born Dec. 28, 1958, and grew up in Cupertino, Calif., where my father worked as an electronics engineer with Hewlett-Packard. This was during the time when the Apple Computer was invented in a garage a few blocks from where I lived in one of the sprawling Silicon Valley suburbs that, on the other side of the technological-revolution coin, were devouring the orchards of fragrant apricot trees that once filled what used to be called the Valley of Heart's Delight. I attended Princeton University, Class of 1980, as a music major; independently studied and wrote about the traditional "seven liberal arts", and worked in the field of computer musicology in the following years; received ordination as a Wiccan priest in 1992; met my wife, Dixie Deerman, the following year, joined her in West Asheville in 1994 when we moved into the 1920s-era home we still live in, and co-founded Coven Oldenwilde with her that same year.

Parkside: I jumped into "planning activism" with a rather noisy splash in 2007 because I had increasingly come to feel over the years that a narrow range of development interests was unfairly over-represented in Asheville's planning decisions. While serving Asheville's diverse community as a Wiccan clergyperson and, from 1999 to 2008, as a journalist at Mountain Xpress and the Asheville Daily Planet, I had come to realize that land-use issues have a deeper and broader impact on us all, especially in this region, than almost any other. When we as a community -- and even the city's staff and elected officials -- were unable to stop what most saw as the flagrantly inappropriate Parkside development from being approved, I joined my wife in sitting in front of the magnolia tree in front of City Hall for three months in 2008 to block it by the only means left us.

I took away three very important lessons from our successful Parkside endeavor. 1) By the end I had followed the city's development-review process close-up from start to finish and beyond, and seen its many major structural defects first-hand. 2) By sitting 24 hours a day in City Hall's front yard, open to everyone who stopped by to talk -- and practically everyone did, from lawyers in high-dollar suits to homeless folks in charity hand-me-downs -- I was fascinated to discover how much knowledge, skill, education, and wisdom collectively exist in this town. I became a firm believer in public input. 3) I became an even firmer believer in listening with an open mind to all sides -- including to the person I and so many others thought was the enemy. When the Parkside developer told me truthfully he simply wanted to make his money back, I resolved to find a "third way" that would allow both sides to achieve what we wanted and, just maybe, something even better.

By mentally stepping back and looking at the larger pattern around me -- just as a planner needs to do -- I realized the historic but neglected Hayes & Hopson building on the Parkside property was ideally situated in what would certainly be one of downtown's most popular spots as soon as the Pack Square remodeling was finished. I contacted the president of the North Carolina Preservation Society (who, I found out much later, also happened to be the mayor of Shelby) and arranged for him to tour the century-old building with the developer. The preservationist pointed out its structural soundness and unique features ... and the end result was that the developer was saved from certain bankruptcy in the Great Recession by dropping what would have been a disastrously overbuilt condo project and adaptively re-using the building instead, turning it into an extremely popular and profitable tavern -- and thereby also saving the magnolia tree.

Downtown Master Plan: At the same time, I became deeply involved with the city's Downtown Master Plan process, because our city manager wisely advised me it was the best way to pursue reform of those flaws in our development-review system. I helped advocate for incorporating historic preservation in the plan (which was not the case starting out), suggested requiring a meeting between developer and public at the beginning of the review process (which became a key element of the DMP), and pushed for transparency and public input at each step of the way (including P&Z meetings, which are now recorded and uploaded to the web for public reference.)

DMP Urban Design Subcommittee: I joined the Urban Design Subcommittee for the Downtown Master Plan when it was formed, and attended every single bi-weekly and then monthly meeting for two years. As the only non-developer on that influential subcommittee, I worked hard to ensure, as much as possible, that Asheville's neighborhoods, historic fabric, and natural environment (especially so-called pocket parks) would be genuinely protected and enhanced by the DMP. This required considerable independent research and consultation with numerous experts (including my own uncle, who just recently retired after a 50-year career as city engineer, planner, and mayor of my birthplace, San Luis Obispo, Calif., a town very similar to Asheville). But it also gave me even more intensive practice in learning to listen respectfully and seriously to those I disagreed with, then working together with them to seek a better solution that would satisfy all our concerns.

Again and again we found those solutions by returning to the core principle on which the Downtown Master Plan is based -- encouraging a pedestrian-focused downtown -- and finding our common ground there. Recognizing that the spirit of a law is as important as its letter, I began successfully advocating for clarifying and stating the intent of each ordinance we revised or wrote whenever its rationale was not obvious, tying it directly to the larger element of the Plan that it was intended to express. Doing so makes a law easier to explain, enforce, defend, and (if need be) change. That kind of transparency also reduces resentment among those whom the law affects.

When the Urban Design Subcommittee completed the mandatory-regulations section of the DMP and prepared to begin work on its voluntary guidelines, I saw a unique opportunity to get two normally adversarial groups -- developers and preservationists -- together at the same table to craft a mutual vision of what we would like downtown developers to do (beyond the bare minimum that the regulations tell them they have to do). I suggested joint meetings between the Urban Design and Preservation Subcommittees. That collaboration proved to be unexpectedly harmonious and quite productive, as the final published draft of DMP recommendations will soon make clear.

DMP Historic Preservation Subcommittee: At that time I also joined the Historic Preservation Subcommittee. One of its main goals is to create an Asheville History Web Portal, which would link to all local preservation websites from one online gateway, and provide interactive maps and timelines of Asheville's history, starting with downtown. I have a fair amount of experience as a web designer, so at the request of the Historic Resources Director I researched and put together a presentation to jumpstart the web-portal effort. I gave the presentation before the committee and also before the Historic Resources Commission. It compares and analyzes examples from other cities, and outlines a direction to follow. You can see the presentation (it's constructed as a website) at: <http://oldenwilde.org/ashevillehistoryportal>. (Please bear in mind that it has not been updated since I made

the presentations last year, and the Preservation Subcommittee has put in a great deal of design work and planning on the portal since then.)

Upholding lighting & landscaping ordinances: Regulations often need to be enforced flexibly. It's important to allow for a variance or conditional use at times when imposing the strict letter of the law on a site's unique circumstances would create a situation that undercuts the intent of the law, or would impose a genuinely unnecessary hardship on a developer. But an exception should never be a loophole -- that is, it should never be a way for a politically powerful developer to dodge a regulation simply because he doesn't like it.

That's why recently I felt it was very important to support our city planning staff's recommendation to oppose the conditions the Ingles grocery chain was seeking for the parking lots of two proposed superstores. The exceptions the chain sought to the city's lighting, landscaping, and pedestrian-safety requirements for gas canopies and large parking lots were based on preference, not hardship: The chain simply did not want to alter its prototype superstore plan. When P&Z, in my opinion as an observer, adopted the chain's viewpoint and disregarded the city's, I thought back to my DMP experience and reflected on all the hard work other groups of stakeholders must have put into crafting the very reasonable ordinances that the chain and P&Z were so casually dismissing. I notified those stakeholders about the case and the precedents that it would set -- with the end result that an army of astronomers descended on City Council to educate Asheville about our light-pollution ordinance.

If I were a P&Z member, I would have handled such an exceptional and controversial situation differently than I did as an activist. I would have advocated postponing our vote until staff could gather for our review the kind of objective evidence they eventually presented to Council. I would have asked staff to discuss the rationale and intent behind these ordinances and tell us something of their history; and upon learning about the extensive stakeholder consensus that went into drafting the lighting ordinance, I would have again urged postponement until we heard expert testimony from these stakeholders about the chain's request that we exempt its extremely bright gas canopies from the ordinance. (Although postponing the vote would have forced a delay in the company's plans, I'm reminded of the old carpenter's saying: "Measure twice, cut once.")

West Asheville Haywood Corridor planning: I am currently participating in the Haywood Corridor meetings in West Asheville that the city is sponsoring under the coordination of planner Alan Glines. Council recently heard about the progress of this group toward developing an overall plan for the corridor's growth when meeting at Vance Elementary. You may recall the presentation I gave on the movement to preserve and restore the old Sulphur Springs Pavilion and associated greenspace as a combined historic landmark and greenway. (Since then, we've continued making very good progress on this.)

Sulphur Springs Historic Greenway proposal: I started the Sulphur Springs snowball rolling when the Haywood group discussed the topic of preservation, because I felt that it would provide many benefits beyond preserving a unique historic structure that covers the literal wellspring of West Asheville and of Western North Carolina's tourist industry. It could be an excellent draw to boost tourism (and hence the local economy) in West Asheville, since its story expresses so well the combination of history, environment, health, and diversity that makes our local culture appealing to so many. By combining two smart-growth concepts that are usually perceived as separate -- greenways and preservation -- this project is, once again, bringing together two city communities, environmentalists and preservationists, that do not always see eye-to-eye.

PRIORITIES:

Carry out our master plans: For several months now I have been attending every P&Z meeting and reading all associated agenda documents to practice and get a feel for doing the real thing. I am also currently studying the city's comprehensive 2025 Plan. Its opening "vision" section makes quite clear the guiding principles of the sustainable/smart growth philosophy that the city adopted by a public-consensus process similar to that of the Downtown Master Plan.

I believe it is very important for P&Z members to remember that the first word in "Planning and Zoning" is "planning." They need to weigh every decision they make upon the scale of our city plans' guiding principles. In the 2025 Plan, the core principle that I see as underlying all the others is directly stated on its opening pages:

Strengthen sustainability: "Smart Growth is a planning concept that links growth patterns to fiscal, environmental, and social resources. ... [It] is derived from the earlier concept of 'sustainability' ... a balancing of economic objectives, social goals, and environmental resources in a way that works for both present and future generations."

In other words, to be smart and sustainable, Asheville's growth needs to be consciously and consistently guided by what is often termed the "triple bottom line" of "people + planet + profit".

From the Parkside project on, I would contend, the experiences and initiatives I've described above demonstrate how broadening our consideration of land-use issues from a narrow focus on maximizing profits and tax revenues, to a more expansive vision that balances economic interests with social and environmental ones is the most practical and most sustainable approach our city planning can take -- and in the long run, it is the most profitable path. In my view, these experiences prove the validity of the core principle of Asheville's comprehensive plan.

Pursue regional planning: Along with the triple bottom line, we also need to focus more proactively on regional planning. For example, it's not smart growth for Asheville to grow "up" if Buncombe is continuing to grow "out". Increasing urban density without also decreasing suburban and rural sprawl contradicts the premise of smart growth, and simply puts even more unsustainable pressure on our resources. I see this happening right around the corner from me on Leicester Highway, with spot development of strip malls and subdivisions accessible only by automobile randomly gobbling up scenic hills and fertile farmland.

"Regional approaches lie at the heart of successful growth management," notes an online white paper I recently read titled "Is Home Rule The Answer? Clarifying The Influence Of Dillon's Rule On Growth Management" (http://www.brookings.edu/reports/2003/01metropolitanpolicy_richardson.aspx). "Dillon's Rule in no way precludes strong action to deal with growth-related challenges." Possibilities I would like to see P&Z explore include coordinating with existing regional planning bodies such as Land of Sky Regional Council, and interacting directly with Buncombe County's planning commission, perhaps by holding joint comprehensive-planning discussions.

Since Asheville has agreed to continue seating two county-appointed ETJ representatives on P&Z even though (as I understand from reading the 2025 Plan) they are no longer officially required now that the county has adopted zoning, perhaps Buncombe County would likewise be willing to seat one or two city representatives on *its* planning board, to act as regional-planning liaisons. And now that involuntary annexation is no longer available as a growth-management method, perhaps we need to preach the sustainability philosophy with more conviction and outreach, so that nearby communities voluntarily agree to participate in regional planning efforts, while retaining administrative independence.

Discourage historic demolitions: Another priority I see -- as does our local preservation community -- is finding a fair way to discourage and, whenever possible, prevent demolition of important historic buildings, perhaps by subjecting such proposed demolitions to City Council review and approval. That's what most cities around the world do (including some in North Carolina) whose economies are as dependent on heritage tourism as ours is. For example, if a hypothetical owner of the Jackson Building were to decide tomorrow to demolish it, there is at present nothing we could do to stop it. Even if it were a designated local landmark (the only protection currently available for historic buildings downtown), we could only compel the owner to delay demolition for a few months.

Encourage urban greenspace: "Human space" needs to be better integrated with "natural space". Acres of

impermeable pavement and roofing turn cities into sterile heat sinks that destabilize regional weather patterns, worsen erosion and pollution, and deny green space for recreation and local food production. Asheville's parks and greenway master plans, and enhanced awareness about runoff capture, are important priorities for me.

Educate before we regulate: In fulfilling its regulatory role, I would like to see P&Z be not only a more scrupulous watchdog, but also a more conscientious educator. Good regulations are not an imposition on one's rights so much as a reminder of one's responsibilities. The current hue and cry against any and all government regulation disingenuously ignores the eternal human reality that not all of us follow an innate moral instinct for always doing the right thing (although most of us feel quite convinced that we do).

On the other hand, government often focuses too much on regulation and not enough on education, of itself as well as others -- because regulatory staff are expected, like police, to focus strictly on the letter of the law, not on its spirit. For example, permeable pavers are a widely accepted and effective method of stormwater control, yet a West Asheville restaurant that installed them in its parking lot reportedly had to overcome a maze of regulatory hurdles simply because local officials were unfamiliar with them. Similarly, I think well-intended stream-buffer regulations have met with harsh public resistance because they have been put forward with too little public education beforehand about the causes and consequences of streambank erosion.

This is where P&Z could play a much more active role as a wise mediator between government and the public. If something is the right thing to do, let's debate and educate before we regulate, and then find ways to help mitigate the cost and burden of complying.

Utilize public comment: It's no secret that I believe written and spoken public comment to P&Z should always be treated as very important, never as just a feel-good formality. I see Asheville as a pioneer in putting collaborative and participatory government into practice. Some people tell me this is a bad thing, that we cater to too many diverse and apparently conflicting voices. My experience is quite the contrary: Our diversity is not a weakness, but our greatest strength. Diversity gives our local culture the same resilience it gives our unique Blue Ridge Mountains ecosystem, which scientists tell us has survived longer than almost any other on the planet.

What we Ashevilleans all have in common, I've learned, is this fascinating and beautiful place we call home, and a shared desire to keep it that way. To find the best ways of doing so during these chaotic times, when the economic and political landscape we took for granted just four years ago may very well be disintegrating permanently, we are going to need to tap every cell of Asheville's collective creativity and expertise. We are very fortunate to have an amazing wealth of retired professional experts from every field here, as well as innovative "green" entrepreneurs -- proven local job creators, current studies show -- who are drawn here by our environmentally conscious culture. We should welcome their volunteered expertise. Far from "politicizing" development review, as some have charged, public comment helps decisionmakers see and understand the "social" and "environmental" factors in the triple bottom line. Its importance is also emphasized in the 2025 Plan.

Decide carefully: I have a personal "decision filter" I use when evaluating development proposals:

- A) Consider the big picture: How does this fit into adopted city plans? Is it a good fit, or are city plans' parameters being stretched to make it fit?
- B) Consider the details: How does this affect neighbors and community, and what do they say? How does it affect the environment? How does it affect historic preservation? How does it affect nearby businesses, and would it create or destroy local jobs?
- C) Do the homework: Not only reading the staff report carefully, but visiting the site to see what's there, on the ground.
- D) Ask the questions: What is the law, and what are the facts? Ensure that disinterested experts are also answering these questions, not just advocates for or against the proposal.
- E) Listen, then speak -- then listen again: Most important of all, keep an open ear and an open mind. I try not to make a final judgment until I've heard -- and genuinely understand -- every side's point of view.