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:**

Nicole Townsend

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

I didn’t wake up one morning and make the decision to serve my community by running for City Council. I woke up, rolled up my sleeves, and asked: “what do you need?”

I have been organizing in Asheville for roughly ten years around LGBTQ issues, cash bail, environmental justice, and police accountability. For too long, we have said no to the people, and yes to pockets. We have to stop pretending as if we are actually embodying the equity and inclusion that we say we are. I’m running for City Council because I believe we need an elected body that represents a variety of perspectives, experiences, and identities. I deeply believe that if we put aside fragility and ego, we can create the Asheville that we all deserve. We need folks on the council that will push back against the state to ensure that they do not impose that of which is unjust to those living here in Asheville, such as districts.

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

In the middle of our downtown square, we proudly celebrate two white supremacists, Zebulon Vance and Robert E. Lee. It’s deeply disheartening for the City of Asheville to prioritize racial healing without starting the process to ensure that we stop uplifting those who were on the opposite side of the spectrum. I want to work with the African American Heritage Commission and the Asheville Downtown Associate to create an action plan that includes removing our current honoring center of Zebulon Vance and Robert E. Lee.
We must listen to our neighbors and find creative solutions to our downtown parking barriers. I fully support the park and ride model. However, in order for such a thing to be implemented, we must expand our transit system to our neighbors who live further out in Buncombe County, and we must extend the service hours so out late-night workers can have access to public transportation.

Downtown Asheville needs to be home to more Black and Brown owned businesses. I believe the collaboration between The Business Inclusion Office and the Mountain Business Equity Initiative is a step in the right direction.

**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?

I support mixed-use development that allows for buildings to include housing units, small grocery markets, and other businesses such as eateries and book stores.

I also support incentives for business that pay a living wage and additional incentives for those that pay $15 an hour.

**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?

We must listen to our neighbors and find creative solutions to our downtown parking barriers. I fully support the park and ride model. However, in order for such a thing to be implemented, we must expand our transit system to our neighbors who live further out in Buncombe County, and we must extend the service hours so out late-night workers can have access to public transportation.

I want us to use our creativity to expand upon the bike lanes, and work with Downtown Businesses to support their employees and patrons to transition away from utilizing the car each time they come downtown, should that be an option that is accessible.

**ISSUE:** Supporting local business

**QUESTION:** What strategies would you employ to ensure the sustainability of small locally owned businesses in downtown?
In 2016, Asheville City Council approved a small business loan program, which I support. I also believe we must work more collaboratively with the Business Inclusion Office to ensure that folks who call Asheville home can continue to support our local economy through launching small businesses in our Downtown area.

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?

- Parking
- Sidewalks
- Roads

I believe we must go line-by-line down our budget and divest from the things that are not serving us so we can invest what we need. Bonds and participatory budgeting can support us with improving and expanding upon our infrastructure needs.

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?

Public safety is the welfare and protection of the general public, which includes goals of prevention and protection from danger. We need to transform the way we view public safety. There is a deep level of mistrust when it comes to the community and the Asheville Police Department. Due to the lack of stable Chief leadership and the harm that has been caused, it is going to take a significant amount of community relations improvement if there is going to be any trust-building. Council and the City Manager must work with the Asheville Police Department to figure out why there is consistent unstable leadership.

One way to build trust with the community is to ensure that our current Consent to Search policy includes pedestrians and bicyclists. Many of our neighbors carry their homes on their backs and have been deeply humiliated as they have had to lay all that they own on the ground. It makes no sense to sign a Climate Emergency Resolution with the knowledge that we must drastically reduce the number of cars on the road while refusing to offer pedestrians and bicyclists the same rights as drivers.

We are asking our police officers to be first responders when it comes to mental health, addiction, and homelessness. This is harmful, and we can’t continue to police away from the issues that our community is facing at high levels. We need first responders that are not employed by the Asheville Police Department to support our community members who are dealing with a mental health crisis, addiction, and homelessness. I believe there are officers that may have creative
solutions to ensure they are no longer serving as first responders in instances of mental health crisis and homelessness. BeLoved Asheville has a street medic team that is modeling what it means to support the folks most impacted as they lead the work. We must connect already established initiatives to resources so that they work can expand, while also addressing the root - poverty.

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 addressing homelessness in our community?

I believe we must revisit our zoning laws. We have hundreds of churches in Asheville that would open their doors to our community members if they did not fear fines or the possibility of shutting down. Our churches could serve folks who need temporary housing until they find more sustainable long term housing.

We have the opportunity to work in collaboration with owners of ADU’s and homestays who may be interested in accepting Housing Choice Vouchers. It is extremely difficult to find housing within the City limits that accepts Housing Choice Vouchers, which means, we are continuing to push people further out into the county, or, pushing them to turn to shelters due to needing to be in town for access to employment and medical/social services.

We have to make interventions as it relates to housing and criminal record. It is not okay for us to sit back and watch our formally incarcerated community members check all the boxes society has asked them to check, only to get turned down for housing due to their record.

Investing in community housing cooperatives, community land trust, and offering housing units below 30% AMI will allow our community members to have more access to housing.

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?

The current minimum wage is $7.25 an hour. Someone making minimum wage has a gross monthly income of $1,160. If their rent is 30% of their gross monthly income, it means it would be roughly $348 a month. The options for housing include housemates or a motel.

People making minimum wage can not afford the affordable housing that is being built on City-owned property. We have to stop selling our property to developers. Period. We must develop our own affordable housing that includes community housing cooperatives.
Many of our firefighters can not afford our affordable housing, and that is a problem that we should be deeply ashamed of.

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