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 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 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, climate resilience, responsible smart growth, and growing our local business economy.

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

Failing and inadequate infrastructure, including:

- Aging and crumbling sidewalks.
- Parking.
- Trees.
- Road striping.
- Bike lanes.
- Complete streets.
- Benches.
- Lighting.
- Trash Cans.
- Bathrooms.
- And the ongoing maintenance of all of them.

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?
We need to update our Downtown Design Guidelines and Downtown Master Plan to reflect smart and responsible growth policies. These are the guiding documents for preferred design, use and placemaking strategies for downtown projects. They include mixed uses, public spaces, loading zones, materials, landscaping, parking, and more.

Responsible growth is building for social, fiscal, and environmental sustainability. It means we fill in and build up more than we build out. It means we need to mix uses and activate the ground floor to create diverse and exciting blocks that can house local businesses and workers. It means we grow housing opportunities across all incomes and grow downtown neighbors. Infill projects in Downtown will create new, needed tax base and revenues to help with growing expenses.

**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. I helped lead the creation of the Downtown Census, the first survey issued to downtown businesses that identified our demographics and needs. Parking issues are at the top of all of our survey results.

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:** Supporting local business

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

I will work on more housing solutions for downtown. As it is, many local businesses rely disproportionately on tourism. Sustainability and culture depend on community building and depend on residents that support their neighborhood.

We need to update our Design Guidelines and Master Plan to require a portion of the ground floors of new projects to have commercial and retail space. No more Hyatts, where an entire block is wiped from use by the local community. As downtown grows,
we will face office and retail space demand that will drive up prices if we do not create additional supply.

We need to examine the review process for commercial space. I’ve initiated this idea on the Commission. The Downtown Census highlighted the typical size of storefronts. If we want to keep big box stores and large chains at bay, we can update the review process to ensure we get smaller spaces that attract independent businesses.

Collaboration is one of our strongest tools. We cannot regulate or require developers to rent to local businesses. We can, however, continue to build and foster a local business economy that makes local businesses the best tenants and the priority to developers.

We need to organize and team up for services like leasing advice and group discounts on marketing and insurance. We need to experiment with extended business hours; after 9pm downtown only has restaurants and bars open. Visitors are seen peering in window fronts of closed stores. We need to expand pedestrian-only days and events focused on locals. We need to invest in a permanent outdoor market setup around Pack Square Park, where local vendors can set up regularly.

We need groups like the CVB and ADA to invest financial support in local businesses via façade grants and continued educational programs like the Speaker Series, which brings experts to Asheville to speak to our issues.

And we each need to shop and visit downtown. Downtown is everyone’s neighborhood.

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?

Infrastructure is the anatomy of downtown. Creating a place that is inviting, vibrant, active, safe, and resilient requires consistent efforts and investment. Downtown is growing steadily, as is Asheville around its central business district. The entire city is experiencing growing pains and this has left downtown behind in its needed maintenance.

2. Parking. See the lengthy response above for suggestions on how.
3. Cleanliness. We need more cleanup initiatives, more trash cans, cigarette butt removal, sharps containers, pressure washing, and street cleaners.

We have to invest in downtown. Tourism tax dollars should help. Currently, tourism tax dollars cannot cover operating expenses like pressure washing. It can however, fund our scheduled capital needs and free up money for operational spending.

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?

We need regular awareness and meetings with the downtown unit. I attend monthly meetings that include downtown police and updates. The greater community can do this, too.

The new downtown district went live Jan 5. They are still training and filling positions but, there is an increased presence of community officers downtown. These officers are mostly on foot or bike, not in cars with blue lights. The remaining officers are being trained and will be in place by Summer.

Additionally, the pilot program with the fire fighters last year taught us many lessons. A similar longer term solution is needed. Community officers will help with this but we need people focused on the safety and mental health needs of various community members. We also increase our fire budget by having them as the only first responders; it is time to review if this makes the most economical and public safety sense.

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?

The Homeless Advisory Committee and Affordable Housing Committee are volunteers working diligently on solutions. We are so fortunate to have their time and input.

On the programs front, we need to expand and invest in organizations like A Hope, who allow our houseless community members to shower and do laundry. They currently close in the early afternoon. And Haywood St Congregation, who hosts an 8 bed respite center for recently discharged and homeless neighbors and would do more if they could. And ABCCM, who is underway on building an 80 room, 120 bed transitional housing facility. And Pisgah Legal, who works every day to protect renters from eviction and would have a greater capacity to help if they had more funding. And Homeward Bound, who provides wrap around services, meaning we do more than surround someone with walls and a roof; we help them cope with the change and gain skills and independence. We need to educate about the Housing First model and implement it everywhere we can; this means we do not overlook those with addiction or prior issues from getting housing. We also need to assist our homeless neighbors with dignified solutions. In 2019 I lobbied for and advised on our first 24 hour public restrooms. We need more and I’m working on that, too.

On the Planning front, we need zoning solutions that allow for greater infill options, for smaller units like tiny homes and garage apartments in more accessible areas and for them to be available for those most in need of homes.

We need major initiatives and a champion for affordable housing on Council. I am that person. I will champion affordable housing and helping end homelessness as my primary goal.
We also need to vote for strong leaders in the legislature and state-wide offices who can effectively work to expand Medicaid and get better services to our community.

**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?

Housing issues are multifaceted. Please see my website (SageforAsheville.com) for more details on my housing initiatives. As of April 2019, our makeup downtown was 60% hotels and 40% housing, of which 33% was affordable. With the recently approved Coxe and Asheland project, we are now 50/50% hotel to housing. We need to watch this ratio closely and ensure that housing growth is prioritized and affordability is part of the mix.

Generally speaking and city wide, we do not have enough housing to meet the existing demand. We need approximately 2,000 units for individuals making less than the median income. (*AMI or area median income means exactly half our community makes more and half our community makes less than that figure). And we need units across all income levels. This lack of housing inventory is pushing prices up faster than we can subsidize our way out of it, which impacts our most vulnerable the most.

I’ve served as the Vice Chair and now Chair of Affordable housing for several years. In that time, I have helped push the target of subsidy programs from 120% of our area median income down to 60% of our median income so we can help those in the most need. It also moves policies closer to and includes those with housing vouchers/section 8, allowing our programs to help with homelessness. I’ve reviewed and pushed for updates on every policy for housing we have. I’ve met with developer after developer to understand why it is we cannot build enough housing. On the policy front, we caught and sent to Council two major policy holes:

1. Projects building affordable housing were required to offer lower rents. Contracts however did not mandate that those rentals went to people that income qualified, meaning even those who could afford more still got them. Now they go to individuals that qualify and we can audit rent rolls any time.
2. Subsidy programs perpetuated discrimination against low income folks. We now require all projects receiving subsidies to accept housing vouchers/section 8. Before, they did not.

We need major initiatives and a champion for affordable housing on Council. I am that person. I will champion affordable housing and helping end homelessness as my primary goal.

What isn’t widely known is how close so many community members are to becoming homeless themselves. Many are one medical diagnosis, car accident, or job loss from housing insecure. Helping the homeless also means helping those close to it from becoming homeless.

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

I’m so excited for the work the French Broad Co+op is doing. I serve as the Finance and Project Manager for our downtown, community owned, living wage grocery. I will lead us
through expansion into a full grocery, where community members and downtown residents can shop for all their needs, enjoy great ready made meals, and grow community in downtown. This will help us in our efforts to increase housing and community in downtown. Come see us; let’s grow together!