

FCNC Candidate Questionnaire for Charles D. Smith, District 3 Candidate

1. Please describe your principal reasons for wanting to serve on the Council and your involvement with neighborhoods. What are the two highest-priority issues affecting neighborhoods in your district, and what solutions do you propose?

My work with the state and local governments has given me some insights that I think would benefit the 3rd district. Also, I was actively involved in the Columbia Heights Neighborhood Association, which I helped found. I served on the board in all the offices including president.

Because of that neighborhood's proximity to downtown and the University of Kentucky, residents there are acutely aware of the problems and pressures that come from both sides. I was active in during multiple zone changes and land-use battles.

Third district neighborhoods are at the epicenter of many complex issues that Lexington needs to address: how will infill and redevelopment work; should there be increased density in established neighborhoods; who is responsible for bad behavior by tenants and should we allow ADUs or BandBs?

I am running for council to try to ensure that Lexington neighborhoods are a priority and remain stable.

2. Lexington has seen a significant need for affordable housing in recent years, especially for the most economically challenged; and the new 2020/21 budget proposes significant cuts in the Affordable Housing Trust Fund allocation and staffing. As Councilmember, what strategies would you offer for affordable housing?

The city plays a huge role, along with other entities such as the Lexington Community Land Trust, in addressing affordable housing issues.

The Trust is a good example of how affordable housing is being provided in the 3rd District. It is poised to build more houses in the Davis Bottom neighborhood.

The mixed-use development at the corner of Midland Avenue and Third Street includes about 30 percent affordable housing. Historic Pleasant Green Baptist Church has indicated that it wants to build affordable housing units on its properties adjacent to the church. I don't know of any definite plans, but I support that idea.

There are acres of vacant property and hard-surface parking lots downtown. Many of these are city owned. I would encourage the city to find private developers to build on these properties. And, if these projects include housing, a percentage of it should be affordable housing.

3. The novel coronavirus and resultant economic downturn has had a disproportionate impact on Lexington's most vulnerable communities. In this time of economic emergency, what are your priorities for social services and for workforce and small business recovery?

Thankfully the federal government is making stimulus money available to local governments. This has allowed the council and mayor to put funds back into the budget for funding social service agencies at the level they had last year. Many of these agencies could use more money, but at least the most vulnerable will be able to receive their prior level of funding. Until more, and more stable revenue streams are available, many of these organizations will always have to make do with less than they need.

The Federal government and now the LFUCG are making funds available to small businesses to help them stay afloat until our lives can get back to “normal”. I have been trying to support our local restaurants by getting curbside pickup at least twice a week. Since things are opening back I want to start supporting them by getting back out to enjoy dining out.

No one knows how long we will have to live with restrictions that are to prevent the spread of the virus. Before the pandemic, Mayor Gorton and Dr Capiluto were forging partnerships to make Lexington an attractive place for high-paying jobs. These efforts should continue as the economic effect of the virus goes away. With just a little luck that could be very soon.

4. What do you believe are the most critical needs and most effective avenues for improving public safety in your district and in the city as a whole?

For many years the Police and Fire Departments in Lexington have provided quality professional service. There have been only a few incidents where a police officer or firefighter had transgressions serious enough to be fired.

Overall, I have a great deal of respect for our public safety officers.

The way the police have handled the recent Black Lives Matter protests has been exemplary. If the marchers can continue to protest without resorting to violence, some meaningful changes can occur. I believe our Lexington police have played a role in keeping the violence from escalating here.

There have been many iterations of the community policing units that have helped some of our neighborhoods. I would encourage more funding for those programs that can be such a huge benefit. I know a large portion of the budget goes toward public safety and that can make it difficult to fund some programs that help our most vulnerable citizens.

I don't think that under the collective bargaining agreement there will be any reduction in the portion of the budget spent on public safety. We need to find sources of income to generate monies to pay for all the services that we want to fund.

5. To what extent do you find Lexington's current zoning enforcement, code enforcement and building inspection adequate, and how would you propose to improve them? Do you support instituting rental licensing and inspection for Lexington in the near future?

I would support licensing and inspection requirements for all rental properties. Like other businesses, they need to have guidelines for safety, upkeep and routine maintenance. Most other businesses are regulated, and I think they should be also.

Rundown properties can be detrimental to property values within close proximity. That is not fair to other homeowners in the area.

In the past, the city has looked into punishing landlords for the bad behavior of their tenants. I do not believe in this approach.

Those responsible should be held accountable. The landlords should be responsible for their property maintenance (including grass mowing, sidewalk repair, and anything on the exterior of the house that violates local ordinances), and for following local ordinances. (For example, if trash receptacles were left on

the curb too long, it would be the responsibility of the landlord. Noise violations would be the responsibility of the tenants).

6. Council is currently reviewing an Accessory Dwelling Unit ZOTA, a change in the zoning ordinance to permit and regulate independent second dwellings, including units for rent, on single-family lots. Do you support the ordinance as currently proposed or in some other form? Do you find the proposed ADU zoning suitable for neighborhoods in your district? Should it be adopted city-wide or decided differently for different locations?

In the 3rd district, which bears much of the brunt of density issues, the goal to increase density by allowing second structures on single family lots will be detrimental to our neighborhoods.

No matter how the wording is in the ZOTA, I believe the result will be an increase in rental properties in already overwhelmed or historic neighborhoods.

To label these ADUs “granny flats,” is a Trojan horse and is not the use that most of them will have. Increases in traffic, noise and more run-down properties will follow their introduction into some of our most vulnerable UK/downtown neighborhoods.

Therefore, the approval of ADUs should be carefully considered in areas where they could have a negative impact in the neighborhood.

I would much rather the city develop a program with the cooperation of UK and Central Baptist Hospital to incentivize home ownership by their employees.

7. Council is currently reviewing business and revenue ordinances to require registration, licensing, and hotel tax for short-term rentals like Airbnb. Do you support these ordinances? Do you recommend changing or adopting zoning ordinances at the same time, to allow short-term rentals in residential zones or restrict them?

I am very much in favor of Airbnbs and similar online rentals being treated like other businesses.

Before the virus, Lexington had positioned itself to become a tourist and convention destination. With determination, we can finish the downtown projects that we have begun and recapture that momentum. Short-term rentals could be a huge source of income and can make our city a more attractive place to visit. But the properties need to have oversight; registration and owners need to pay taxes on their rental income. These types of rental properties should have to meet some qualifications to protect the character and quality of life for those who live nearby. In the 3rd district, one of the big issues with short-term rentals would be parking. Like most of us, I have heard complaints about noise and disruptive behavior emanating from those rentals.

I believe there should be a limit to the number of rentals in each neighborhood and would include area neighbors in the process of where they are placed.

8. What are the priority transportation and mobility needs in your district, including those of motorists, bus riders, cyclists and walkers, and how would you meet them?

One thing that would help the 3rd District immensely would be for the state to give control of state routes in downtown to the LFUCG.

With our ex-mayor having the job of State Transportation Secretary, it seems we have a great opportunity to make that happen.

This would open up the possibility of creating innovative solutions to making downtown safer for all who travel there by whatever mode they choose.

I think it is very dangerous for bicyclists and automobiles to share the road. The Town Branch Commons trail through downtown is a great example of how to make it safer for all by separating cars and bikes. It might be very expensive to do that, but it can be done in small increments.

Lextran can be so much more than it is now. We need to strive to make it a great alternative to vehicle traffic so more people will want to ride it. It can be convenient, affordable, and safe for all, we just have to want to make it so.

9. How urgent or important today is historic preservation (HP) and protecting Lexington's historic places from demolition? What strategies would you recommend? Should the city restore funds for HP staffing and the studies required to identify both individual historic assets and districts that qualify for National Register listing, historic tax credits and local H-1 designation?

I would like for the Historic Preservation Office to transition into more of a user-friendly resource for homeowners within H-1 Districts who wish to remodel or improve their homes.

I would hope they could become a clearing house for helping citizens to understand and be aware of all the tax credits that could help them to upgrade their properties.

Many of our historic areas are full of beautiful homes, but some parts of many historic districts have homes that need some TLC. With some additional funding and incentives from the city, the Historic Preservation Office could lead the way in helping make all our historic districts something that we all can be proud of. Many homeowners could use some technical and financial help, especially in the H-1 overlay areas, to be encouraged to improve older home and neighborhoods, which are scattered throughout the 3rd District.

10. What do you see as the environmental impact on our neighborhoods of an urban growth strategy focused on intensive infill and redevelopment? How do you assess our water and air quality, trees, greenspace, flood control, etc.) in this context?

I believe the strides being made with the EPA consent decree to replace and repair the sanitary and storm sewers will pay huge benefits in all of our neighborhoods.

The sewer capacity for future projects is given much more scrutiny than in the past. The capacity of those systems needs to be thoroughly vetted before development plans move forward.

I would like to make Lextran a more attractive, viable and convenient choice for our community. We need to reduce our carbon footprint, and increasing the use of public transportation will help.

Another way to decrease the footprint is to get more people biking and walking. My dream of a partnership between UK, Central Baptist Hospital and the LFUCG to incentivize their employees living in our 3rd District neighborhoods would be a huge help in making that happen.

As all of you know, Jake Gibbs was a champion of all of these things, and increasing our tree canopy, which also reduces our carbon emissions.

While I know I am nowhere close to being as eloquent as Mr. Gibbs, I do believe whole-heartedly in pursuing those dreams.

11. Do you find that the 2018 Comprehensive Plan policies and processes clearly, fairly and effectively guide decision making on zone changes and development plans for your District and for Lexington as a whole?

No.

There is a disconnect between the goals of the new Imagine Lexington Comprehensive Plan and the will of the people to follow through with the recommendations included in the plan.

In a Herald-Leader editorial this spring, it was pointed out how this process is costing all of us time and money, and it creates confusion.

It is not fair to the neighborhoods to have to constantly be vigilant about zone changes that could have a negative effect on them.

And, if neighborhoods decide to fight against an unwanted development, the expense of hiring an attorney is often unaffordable. Likewise it is not fair to developers to follow all the guidelines in the comprehensive plan, with the upfront expense that requires, and then be turned down.

The flexibility the planning staff points to in the plan is causing uncertainty about what can be built.

12. What or where, in your view, are the “downtown” and “corridors” in Lexington most suited for intensive growth and development, within your District, and in the urban county as a whole? Similarly where is there “underutilized land” that would be most suitable for development? More generally, what are your land-use priorities for the neighborhoods in your district? What development is missing, and what is to be protected?

Lexington will continue to grow and there will be increased demand for housing.

I do not know the exact amount of vacant property within a one mile radius of the Government Center, but it seems to me that there is a lot.

Much of that property – for example the surface parking around Rupp Arena – is owned by the city or a quasi-governmental entity.

I would encourage the government to promote housing development on all its downtown property. And it should be stipulated that a developer be required to have a certain percentage of dwelling units for affordable housing, like the current development at Midland Avenue and Third Street.

Building up downtown would benefit adjacent neighborhoods, particularly in our historic districts.

We'll need to compromise if we want to protect the beauty of our farmland outside the Urban Service Boundary, but also manage growth inside of it.

13. What is your vision for preserving the integrity and character of our urban neighborhoods even as we protect Lexington's signature rural area?

We can't stop Lexington from becoming denser, but we can manage the increased density.

The "up not out" idea of density should occur mostly in the third district on current under-utilized property.

My goal would be to get properties that could be used for increased housing density into the hands of those who want to build those types of developments.

Please know that I walk the walk. I live in a downtown high-rise and walk downtown and to businesses nearby. But, I also love that I can leave my house by car and within 10 minutes be on beautiful Old Frankfort Pike.

The PDR program is protecting much of Fayette County's rural landscape so that it will be available for generations. We must allow growth inside the Urban Services Boundary that is beneficial to the quality of life of current residents and those to come.

14. What key issues do you identify in revenue, expenditures, bonding, tax incentives, etc. in light of a long-term trend of LFUCG expenditures growing faster than revenue? What avenues for achieving a better balance look most promising considering not only the current economic crisis but thereafter?

Much of Lexington's revenue comes from payroll and net profit taxes making the city far too dependent on a thriving economy. Several prior councils have wrestled with ideas to make revenue more stable and less dependent on current fluctuating sources.

Among those ideas are raising the payroll and/or net profit taxes to cover next year's projected shortfall, raising the tax on insurance payments or levying a restaurant tax. (The latter is only possible if the state passes a statute that allows the city to do that, and it would likely be difficult for many restaurants to do that right now with all the economic problems they are facing.)

I firmly believe that more money needs to be found somewhere and that a small bump in current taxes could help us until the economy improves.

But, we need something more long term.

I propose something a little bolder and more transparent: a citizen fee for every resident over 21 in Fayette County. A \$10 per month fee could raise around \$30 million dollars, which could help with the current shortfall and in the future could be used for special projects, such as addressing the issues with the current government center, a project I strongly support.