

Triad City Beat Questions

Name: Christopher Smith
Email: VoteChrisSmith@gmail.com
Phone: 336-528-4959

What is your background in politics? If you are an incumbent, please state which offices you have held and when.

I previously ran for office in 2020 in County Commissioner District B. While we were not successful in unseating decades-long incumbents, as the top Democratic vote-getter, I was successful in closing the previous District B voting gap by approximately 57% - cutting the previous gap from 23,442 votes to approximately 10,061 votes. I am now the Democratic challenger in the West Ward for the Winston-Salem City Council, challenging a 24-year Republican incumbent who has never had a Democratic challenger.

Why were you drawn to run for office?

After my race in 2020, I continued my community advocacy by starting an organization with a few other volunteers called the Non-Discrimination Ordinance Coalition. Our goal was to expand non-discrimination protections in Winston-Salem. We were ultimately successful in passing our expanded ordinance and extending protections to prohibit discrimination based on sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, natural hair or hairstyles, national origin or ancestry, age, creed, religious belief or non-belief, military status, race, color, ethnicity, marital or familial status, pregnancy, and medical condition or disability, in places of public accommodation and employment. However, it was in working with elected officials to pass this policy that issues with status quo politics, intentional slowness, unnecessary red tape, and lacking communication and transparency became apparent. I encountered politicians quick to justify and explain to me why Winston-Salem was one of the last major metropolitan areas in the state to expand our discrimination ordinances, and not enough politicians asking the question, "How can we?" So I determined after our success there that I would run for city office on the premise of being a leader that asks "How can we?"

If you had to pick three issues (housing, economy, schools, policing, etc) which three issues would you say are most important to you?

I believe the top three issues facing our city are Affordable Housing, Community Safety, and Economic Development. It was projected that we are over 16,000 affordable housing units short in our community, nearly 22% of our sworn and non-sworn Winston-Salem Police Department positions are vacant, and over 2 decades, we've lost approximately 15 corporate headquarters.

On my website at www.smith.bio, you can read my policy paper expanding my thoughts on Affordable Housing, my interview with the Police Benevolent Association discussing staffing shortages and how to overcome them, and my interview with the League of Women Voters discussing my thoughts on jumpstarting economic growth in our city.

However, there is one additional issue that impacts every citizen and every issue named. It's one of the chief issues that drew me into the race, and the thing I hope to have an immediate impact on in the West Ward; increased communication and transparency. From minor inconveniences like delayed leaf pickup to major years-long construction delays along Meadowlark Drive, a lack of communication has permeated my district. I aim to be more accessible and maintain an online presence in which to spotlight local businesses and keep citizens informed of city happenings. I take inspiration from my fellow North Carolina Army Officer, Jeff Jackson. He does an amazing job of keeping people in his district abreast of what's happening in Congress and he has an unmatched ability to articulate and explain complex governmental affairs so that they can be understood by all. Further, I aim to implement a West Ward newsletter and hold town halls and listening sessions in my ward.

If elected, how would you work with fellow representatives on the other side of the political aisle?

The Winston-Salem City Council aligns on many issues, but even in places where they align, methodology and priorities among members vary dramatically. One element that I find exciting is that if I win my race, it would mean there are 4 new faces on the 8 person city council. This will undoubtedly bring fresh perspectives and with it, new opportunities for our city. I am eager to be a part of those discussions.

Additionally, working with differences of opinions and methodologies wouldn't be anything out of the norm for me. I served 5 years as an enlisted Airman before moving to the Army to obtain my commission and serving several more years as an Army Intelligence Officer. In that role, I not only dealt with my counterparts up and down the chain of command and at all levels of leadership, but I also represented US interests in foreign nations and interfaced with tribal leaders whose goals were often opposed to my own.

In my current role, both as a small business owner myself and through my volunteer and advocacy work, I often interface with all walks of life. I am accustomed to passionate debate amongst groups that approach problems very differently. I have been in situations in which I know the greater good relies on pragmatism not falling victim to perfection, but it doesn't mean we abandon the quest for better. I know when to speak up in situations that require my leadership and most importantly, I know when to listen when I need to do more learning and understanding.

What do you see as the role of the office you seek?

In a nutshell, my role on city council would consist of being one of the 8 elected volunteers who are the governing body that creates the rules, policies, and procedures that the city follows. I would approve the city's budget and set property tax rates and fees for services like water and garbage collection. I would also appoint important leaders, like the City Manager, who oversees daily operations, and the City Attorney, who offers legal advice, should the need arise.

Additionally, as a council member, I would help choose who serves on various city boards and committees, in addition to serving on them myself. Winston Salem is unique in that council members serve on at least two committees consisting of the Public Safety Committee, the Community Development/Housing/General Government Committee, the Public Works Committee, or the Finance Committee. This is where most matters are discussed and debated before their inclusion on a council meeting agenda, where they receive a vote.

Which city do you live in and what are three favorite things about it?

I am a born and raised product of Winston-Salem. This city isn't just where I live - it's my home. I grew up in a working-class family in an inner-city trailer park off Shattalon Drive. I attended Old Town Elementary and was a free and reduced lunch kid. I learned to swim at Kimberly Park Pool. I learned to play basketball at Polo Rec. I worked many jobs at Hanes Mall. I met my wife while working as a waiter, valet, and lifeguard at Old Town Club. I now operate my own business in Winston-Salem and we have chosen to raise our 2 kids here. They attend public school in the city, & I, like so many other young parents, find myself shuttling from after-school clubs to great West Ward businesses like Tru Taekwondo & Salem Gymnastics. It's this sense of community Winston-Salem offers that I love most about it. It's a community that raised me and a community that now raises my children. We are a big city, but you can still find small-city community here if you want it.

Winston Salem is also a growing and diverse community catering to a broad array of interests and demographics! I love that I can spend a Saturday grabbing breakfast at a rotating assortment of diners and eateries, or lunch at a favorite deli, followed by Pokemon Kids Club at House of Cards, then a kid-friendly activity like duckpin bowling at ROAR, and ending my evening with the Winston-Salem Symphony playing the soundtrack live to a showing of Home Alone or Jurassic Park. Whether you're straight, gay, religious, atheist, black, brown, white, democrat, republican, socialist, single, married, have kids, or don't have kids, love New York Style pizza, love Napoletana pizza, a beer drinker, a whiskey aficionado, prefer concerts, prefer symphonies, etc, there is a community here for you.

I also love that we are a city with a growing small business and entrepreneur base. Innovation Quarter alone is now home to more than 170 companies, and organizations like Winston Starts, Flywheel, and the Center for Creative Economy provide support and assistance for entrepreneurs. While our city faces many serious issues, we remain a bundle of potential.

Could you share a life experience that you feel has best prepared you for a seat on city Council?

Not to dodge the question, but I frequently say we are all a product of our experiences. There isn't a single experience that has better prepared me, rather various experiences - many that I touched on above - offer me understanding and perspective that I think will aid me in my role as a city council member.

Because of my life experiences as an ADHD kid from a working-class family who received free lunch and took advantage of city parks and recreation opportunities to stay out of trouble, I understand how important it is to foster and provide outlets to our young community.

Because of my life experience as a husband and father to children currently in the public school system, I understand the struggle that comes with trying to raise young children in 2024 in Winston-Salem and I understand the inconvenience and exclusion offered by 2 pm committee meetings.

Because of my life experiences as a small business owner, I know the benefits small businesses offer to the economic growth of our city, and I understand the struggles that come with trying to establish and grow a business in this town, including knowing when government is helpful in that endeavor - such as offering COVID relief - and when government is a hindrance - such as overly restrictive sign ordinances.

Because of my life experiences as a community advocate working to expand non-discrimination ordinances, I have direct experience advocating for our community and championing diversity, and I understand the hindrance bloated bureaucracy and red tape offers to good governance.

Because of my life experiences as a member of the armed forces, I have experience interfacing with diverse communities with various agendas, but coming together to seek compromise, solve complex problems, and achieve our goals.

Because of my life experiences as a husband, I know when all else fails, I can ask my wife and she will have the correct answer - always.

What does your city council do best? Where are they ineffective? What are some changes you think you could make?

Right now I believe Winston-Salem City Council does a very good job of encouraging and fostering entrepreneurship through funding and community partnerships. Entrepreneurs in this town have access to mentorship, networking, creative space, and capital. However, I believe support and communication after the transition from concept to established small business is often lacking. Since launching my campaign, in my ward, I have spoken to nearly 50 business owners/managers, including a few who received COVID assistance, of those, none knew who

their council representatives were, few had any follow-up after receiving assistance, and all believed communication between their business and the city could be dramatically improved.

This underscores the broader problem that permeates every issue and what I view as the Council's largest issue and one I touched on above - the need for increased communication and transparency. Whether, we are discussing minor issues like leaf pickup, to complex issues like Crystal Towers or new construction, communication is sorely lacking. I think I could make fairly immediate and substantive changes here by being more accessible, maintaining a social media presence, using my platform to produce content that explains and informs issues around city governance, holding town halls and listening sessions, and starting a West Ward newsletter.

What should the city council spend more money on? Less?

I would like to see the city spend more on its approach to affordable housing to lessen our reliance on the for-profit industry to address our ongoing affordable housing needs. I'm encouraged by initiatives like the city's new Housing Trust Fund, but believe we need to transition beyond just a support role in the creation and management of affordable housing. Long-term, the investments made towards this goal, could be offset by the need to spend less on construction and incentivizing for-profit industries to achieve our goals.

Beyond that, while I am not currently privy to all the details, committee conversations, and studies shared, I often find myself questioning how Winston-Salem prioritizes funding. For example, why are we investing millions into golf course renovations and tree removal, while we face significant housing shortfalls, employment vacancies, and we are raising stormwater fees 8%, water and sewer rates 7%, and doubling our existing motor vehicle fees? These are taxes and fees that will be disproportionately felt by our working-class families.

I understand that line items from one pot can't necessarily be moved into another pot, but it begs the question of why were the allocations made in that manner. And even looking at like-kind spending for example, we have playgrounds with little shade coverage meaning they can't be used in the majority of the hot summer months when kids are out of school, and a parks and recs WePlay website that is difficult and cumbersome to navigate and lacks the needed marketing budget to amplify the programming. If the spending is justified by increased revenue that will allow us to tackle other projects, then the issue again is a lack of communication and transparency already discussed.

What should the city's role in addressing the affordable housing crisis be?

I take a very different approach than many on the city council when it comes to affordable housing. On my website, www.smith.bio, I have a paper on the topic; "Building a Future of Affordable and Sustainable Housing in Winston-Salem," in which people can read my expanded thoughts on the subject. Currently city council sees its role in addressing affordable housing

largely as just a support role - incentivizing for-profit industry and allocating a shortfall of federal dollars. In the short term, I understand the need for public-private partnerships to meet our ongoing needs. I support many of the endeavors in service to these partnerships, such as streamlining growth by updating zoning laws and eliminating red tape, as well as offering tax incentives and developer fee reform. I also agree with efforts made to diversify projects to avoid consolidating poverty into one building or location, and making projects mixed-use to make neighborhoods more walkable. I also believe inclusionary zoning can be used to our advantage, such as by offering density bonuses to developers who include affordable units in their projects.

Long term however, I believe strongly that to create truly affordable housing and meet our ongoing needs, Winston-Salem must shift away from merely a support role and our reliance on for-profit interests, as well as explore ways to reduce our dependence on HUD funding. This would allow us to gain more flexibility and control over housing projects. I have seen the city say that Winston-Salem lacks the skillset needed to accomplish this, but I'd challenge that none of the cities successfully transitioning into this model had the skill set needed to transition until they made it a priority. As I said above, I am encouraged by initiatives like the city's new Housing Trust Fund but believe we could also follow Durham's and Raleigh's lead on efforts to take more ownership of their affordable housing efforts by directly funding projects through a combination of local bonds and city revenue, and encouraging community land trusts.

Do you have any personal or professional relationships that would be a conflict of interest? How would you navigate them as a councilmember?

I do not believe I have any personal or professional relationships that would be a conflict of interest. Part of my advocacy work is centered around home ownership; sharing with others tools, tips, and resources to make that dream a reality. I would love to see the city become more involved in the encouragement of first time home ownership, as I've seen firsthand how that can break generational poverty.

Beyond that narrow interest, I am not a part of any industries or groups that lobby the city, and I am not beholden to any specific groups or leaders. I am a data-driven individual who seeks realistic solutions to accomplish our goals, but I am not afraid to look for those solutions in paths not yet explored. I am known for deep diving into issues to overcome ignorance and seek full understanding, yet speaking my mind and passionately advocating for beliefs I believe positively serve the community. I am not afraid to levy criticism or take ownership of mistakes when necessary.

Earlier this year, the Supreme Court passed a ruling that allows for municipalities to fine or ban unhoused people for being in public spaces. What relationship should the city council have with the city's homeless community?

The growing homelessness issue in our city is a complicated one. People have a need for shelter, yet there isn't enough. So this leads to encampments. And when you consolidate enough unhoused, hungry, and individuals desperate to survive, sometimes with untreated mental health issues, this often leads to an increase in crime. Complicating matters further is that encampments are often on state-controlled land or a DOT right of way, which makes servicing and assisting them more difficult.

At the end of the day though, I believe our relationship with the homeless community should be one of support, compassion, and understanding, not aggression and punishment. I believe in a Housing First model as research shows that it is more cost-effective when services are delivered to someone who is housed when compared to someone who is homeless. I believe our focus should be to work closely with local organizations, advocates, and the unhoused community to create long-term, sustainable solutions. This can come in many forms, from shelter expansion and providing access to housing, to mental health services, job training and opportunities, and travel assistance.