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Slots Filling Quickly In City Council Races

by John Hammer

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The City Council races continue to heat up, with people who want to run trying to find the slot that fits.

Ryan Shell announced this week that he is going to run for City Council.

Bill Knight let it leak out that he is going to run for mayor, but there is as yet no announcement or confirmation.

Shell's announcement should come as no surprise to anyone who has been paying attention to him lately, because he has been acting very much like someone who wanted to run for City Council. But there is a surprise because, although he knows he wants to run, he hasn't decided whether he wants to run at large or in District 2.

He is going to let us know, hopefully before the voting gets underway. District 2 Councilmember Goldie Wells has said that she isn't going to run for reelection, and the word on the street is that school board member Deena Hayes is going to run in District 2. Hayes won't confirm that she is running for City Council, but she won't deny it either. The Simkins PAC is supposed to be supporting Hayes. If that is true then she has about a 90 percent chance of winning. District 2 is predominantly black and the PAC has a lot of clout in predominately black districts.

Although all is not smooth sailing with the PAC these days. At the City Council meeting on April 21, Councilmember Trudy Wade nominated Gwen Alston for a seat on the Piedmont Triad Airport Authority. Gwen Alston is the wife of Guilford County Board of Commissioners Chairman Skip Alston, who is also treasurer of the Simkins PAC.

Skip Alston came to the April 21 meeting with attorney Steve Bowden, chairman of the Simkins PAC, to line up votes for Gwen Alston over Lee McAllister, who is a white male and was nominated by Councilmember Dianne Bellamy-Small.

Councilmembers Sandra Anderson Groat and Wells were both expected to vote for Gwen Alston, but did not, despite the visit from Alston and Bowden. McAllister won on a 6-to-3 vote, with Councilmembers Robbie Perkins, Mike Barber, Zack Matheny, Bellamy-Small, Groat and Wells voting for McAllister, and Councilmembers Mary Rakestraw and Wade, and Mayor Yvonne Johnson voting against McAllister, and in effect for Gwen Alston.

Despite problems with unity at the PAC, if Shell runs in District 2, he is going to have a tough time winning. But the at-large ticket is also getting full. Former City Councilmember Nancy Vaughan, who announced her intention to run at large, has experience and name recognition, which are tough to overcome.

Shell is a blogger, but outside of the small blogging community may not be as well known as he thinks he is. Local politics is not that different from state and national races, in that the person who spends the most money usually wins.

Knight, who ran for City Council at large in 2007, is expected to announce soon that he is running for mayor this year. Mayor Johnson has said that she is definitely running, so that is at least two in that race.

Knight is a retired accountant who got involved in politics to a large degree because he saw the injustice in how former Police Chief David Wray and his command staff were treated by former City Manager Mitch Johnson and former City Attorney Linda Miles.

Knight has come to the council to speak several times about budget matters and the city staff always dismisses his findings and suggestions. The staff should be terrified of having someone on the City Council who can read and understand a balance sheet. For years the staff has gotten away with pretending that fiscal matters are just too complicated to explain to the council. City Councilmember Trudy Wade has brought about some change, but Knight would be able to cause more. The city, under manager Mitch Johnson, always had enough money for projects Mitch Johnson wanted to do, but couldn't find a penny for some council initiatives. Right now the city has money hidden all over the place. Knight would find it, and the staff doesn't want that.

A disappointing rumor is that City Councilmember Mike Barber is not running for mayor, and most likely not running for anything. An at-large run has not been entirely ruled out, but it is becoming more and more unlikely

As far as the current situation, the City Council once again cancelled its briefing session this month. The council, with Mayor Johnson at the helm, has not yet met to discuss the budget. The annual winter retreat wasn't cancelled, but Mayor Johnson never got around to scheduling it, although she said on several occasions she planned to hold it. The regular briefings for March and April this year have been cancelled, although a special briefing was held in April to hear a presentation on the budget from the interim manager. Briefings are less formal meetings where the city councilmembers sit around a table to hear reports from staff and discuss issues. The meetings are not televised and the convention is that, unless it is an emergency, the council does not take binding votes. It is common for the council to take a straw vote to see which way the majority is leaning in order to give direction to staff. These are meetings where a lot of the work of the city gets done.

When the mayor was a city councilmember, she used to do crossword puzzles during these meetings. Now that she is mayor, she doesn't have to do crossword puzzles because she can and does cancel these meetings.

Wells said the only job of the City Council was to appoint people to boards and commissions and approve the recommendations of the manager, whatever they happened to be. With the budget, the council is not going to be left with much time to make changes because the fiscal year begins July 1 and the council is already three months behind where it usually is at this point in the budget process.

In other council news, Barber held the District 4 budget meeting on Thursday, April 23, and that meeting - the final district budget meeting of the year - should become a model. I attended the District 1 meeting held by Bellamy-Small, and the District 3 meeting held by Matheny.

In both of those cases the councilmembers let the staff take the lead, had breakout groups run by staff, where everything is written on huge post-it notes and stuck to the wall, and then you get some poor soul to report back to the whole group.

Barber told staff they didn't need to come, but of course many did. Interim City Manager Bob Morgan spoke briefly about the budget, but mostly it was Barber answering questions from his constituents. If he needed help with specific figures Morgan was ready, but most of it was just Barber doing the best he could to explain to his constituents what was actually going on in city government.

He did a great job. Some members of the City Council like to talk a lot about transparency, but when they get in front of a crowd they have a phalanx of city staff between them and the public. Or else questions have to be written down and then paraphrased by a supporter. People at a presidential candidate's town hall meetings have more freedom to ask questions than at some meetings held by members of the City Council.

Those who attended Barber's meeting got a glimpse of what Greensboro might be like if Barber would run for mayor. A town hall meeting might be a real town hall meeting where the public and the elected officials interact. That has not happened in years.

On a related note, the US Department of Justice has asked to interview a number of those with knowledge about the 40 Greensboro police officers who have filed an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission complaint against the city and also filed a lawsuit against the city, Wray, former Deputy Chief Randall Brady, Detective Scott Sanders and City Councilmember Trudy Wade.

But there is another Justice Department probe in the works. This one is reportedly investigating the assertion that the percentage of minority recruits in the Police Department and the Fire Department do not equal the percentage of minorities in the community.

Several councilmembers said they thought quotas were not considered an acceptable method of improving diversity in the 21st century, but it appears the Justice Department has different ideas. Since Greensboro currently has a black police chief and has had a black police chief for all but three of the last 22 years it is hard to figure who is discriminating against the young black men who are qualified and want to be police officers.

Are we to believe that Chief Tim Bellamy, who has been chief since 2006, is discriminating against his own race? Was it Robert White, who was chief from 1998 to 2002? Or was it Sylvester Daughtry from 1987 to 1998? They can't possibly be blaming the current recruiting practices on Wray, who is white and was police chief from 2002 to January 2006.

This new inquest doesn't seem to make a lot of sense, but it is the federal government.