

## New voices join race for Town Council

CHAPEL HILL, N.C.- Unpopular developmental choices, the perceived failure of elected officials to listen to citizen and expert feedback and the revitalization of downtown are the key issues spurring non-incumbent candidates to run for Town Council in elections held this November.

Currently, nine candidates, three incumbents and six newcomers, are battling for four spots on the council. The election is not districted, so the top four candidates will get the positions.

Nancy Oates, who currently works as a writer for several area publications, including the Chapel Hill Watch, which she founded in 2009, is running one such new candidate. She says, "In the last years or two, the town has made some decisions about development that are taking us away from some of the reasons that people say that they moved here."

The developments in the Ephesus-Fordham and Obey Creek districts are particularly problematic for candidates. The large scale of these projects, along with with what several candidates say is a disregard for environmental factors are among the key grievances.

Adam Jones is another candidate who has lived in Chapel Hill for most of his life and currently works at Mill House Properties, which he started in 2002. He says that these developments create "a vacuum sucking away from downtown and toward the periphery."

Scientist and educator David Schwartz, another long-time resident and town council candidate takes issue with the fact that many of the scheduled developments are large, concrete structures that block off citizen interaction and have little room for public green areas. He says that the town could require new apartment complexes to include public courtyards, but fail to do so.

"The tendency towards marginalizing citizen input is disturbing and unethical," says Schwartz. "It's uncharacteristic of Chapel Hill for the elected leadership to be so deaf or indifferent to what the broad majority of the community is asking for."

Oates says that it's not for a lack of readily available information. Architects, financial analysts, urban planners and real estate experts are all making data driven presentations to

the council. “They were volunteering this [information] because it mattered to them,” says Oates. “The Town Council is going to need to do some repair work with the community.”

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Jones says the developers seem to be driving the developmental planning while the council, who he says should be “the stewards of the town,” takes the back seat.

Jessica Anderson, who has worked in public policy for many years, and is also running for council, says the town is also showing a lack of commitment to affordable housing.

She says developers focus too much on luxury apartments in an area where more residences serve to increase the already high property tax rates. This is especially problematic in minority neighborhoods where families who have paid off their homes are being forced to move because they can’t afford the property tax.

For many candidates, the focus of economic development should be on creating commercial space and attracting entrepreneurs and local businesses.

Schwartz says, “We need to be laser-focused on increasing commercial activity. It’s unfair to further burden people who are already struggling under higher taxes.”

Commercial buildings are important because they generate more tax revenue for the town, while using less government services, says Schwartz.

Chapel Hill, which hovers around 80 percent residential, has been working to increase the amount of commercial land use over the past few years, but has made little progress.

Having a variety of commercial spaces, not just restaurants and franchises, downtown is a key pillar of the platform for several candidates.

Oates suggests renovating several older offices to create shared spaces for entrepreneurs. If people can share a conference room, waiting area and office staff, this would help to keep the rent low in these buildings that are already paid off.

Both Jones and Anderson want to create a more diverse downtown, with a variety of shops that will reflect the quirky, small-town feel of Chapel Hill when they were students, something they say is being lost with current developmental projects.

Jones wants to create a town commons, which he proposes near the 140 block of Franklin Street at Church Street, where the town could hold a farmer's market, food truck rodeo or free, live concerts.

Schwartz, Jones and Anderson are key to point out that they want to be on council specifically to help the town, not as part of a political career.

"It's community service," says Jones, who also advocates for a two-term limit for council members. "It shouldn't be a stepping stone to other political aspirations, and it shouldn't be a second job."

Early voting for the Town Council and mayoral elections starts October 22.