

Policy key in defeat of incumbent mayor

CHAPEL HILL, N.C. – Pam Hemminger’s victory in the Chapel Hill mayoral election was the combined result of her past experience, her plans for the city and a general feeling of dissatisfaction with leadership across the town.

Hemminger was the first challenger to defeat an incumbent mayor in the past 50 years. In the November election, she received 54 percent of the vote, while Mayor Mark Kleinschmidt received only 45 percent.

“I’m very pleased, very excited and very humbled all at the same time,” said Hemminger after winning the election. “I feel very prepared with the experience I have.”

Over the past few years, the town has planned and started many unpopular development projects. The Chapel Hill Alliance for a Livable Town took issue with many of these, including those at The Edge and Obey Creek. Diane Willis, a member of CHALT, said many citizens who were upset with some of the town’s decisions found a voice in CHALT.

After the council passed a rezoning of the Ephesus-Fordham District in May of 2014, CHALT started to think about candidates to put forward for the November 2015 elections. As a PAC, CHALT formally backed three candidates for Town Council: Nancy Oates, Jessica Anderson and David Schwartz. The dissatisfaction in town leadership felt by Chapel Hill at large was demonstrated in election results across the board. Two CHALT of the candidates, Oates and Anderson, were elected to council along with two other newcomers, ousting incumbent candidates Lee Storrow and Jim Ward.

Initially, CHALT was at a loss for mayoral candidates. Willis has known Hemminger for more than 20 years, and when Hemminger mentioned she was considering a run for council, Willis suggested that mayor might be a better option. However, Hemminger did not officially announce her candidacy until July 2015.

Although the CHALT backed several council candidates, Hemminger chose to keep her campaign separate, so as to appeal to more voters, said Willis. The group nevertheless endorsed Hemminger and did a substantial amount of canvassing on her behalf.

Hemminger herself is no stranger to politics. She served as Orange County Commissioner and on the School Board in Chapel Hill. She is also a lifetime member of the Sierra Club, former member of the PTA where her children attended school and has chaired several multijurisdictional committees.

When looking for someone to run her campaign, Hemminger approached three women: Jeanne Brown, Susana Dancy and Amy Ryan. Brown said that due to the “sheer amount of work,” the three decided to run the campaign as a group.

“Once she began informing people that she was going to run, people flocked to her and wanted to help,” said Schwartz.

Hemminger’s campaign managers not only organized the campaign, but also served as the graphic design and editorial staff, in charge of designing posters, print adds and the campaign website.

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Several friends, colleagues and supporters of Hemminger participated in a letter writing campaign, penning letters to the editors of local newspapers. All the letters spoke to different strengths of Hemminger’s, said Brown. Although most of the letters were coordinated through the campaign and written by people who were “thrilled to endorse her,” there were a few unsolicited letters that came a surprise to the campaign staff. In total, about 10 letters were written specifically about Hemminger, and she was mentioned along with other candidates in several others.

Through her broad business and community ties, grassroots campaigning and help from CHALT, Hemminger was able to collect \$18,700, according to pre-election reports filed on Oct. 26. Of that she spent \$6,776. Kleinschmidt, on the other hand, collected only \$14,879 and spent \$3,265.

Kleinschmidt won his first mayoral campaign in 2009 by a margin of only 246 votes over opposing candidate Matt Czajkowski. He ran against Kevin Wolff in 2011, but Wolff only received 18 percent of the vote. In 2013, Kleinschmidt ran unopposed. That year only 4,675 people voted in the mayoral election that usually sees 7,000-8,000 votes cast.

Some Chapel Hill voters said that two easy victories left Kleinschmidt unprepared to face a serious competitor in the election.

“If Kleinschmidt believed the conventional wisdom that incumbents always win, that may have contributed to his defeat” said Schwartz.

Brown echoed Schwartz’s sentiment saying, “Early polling said that he was up by 12 percent and that felt like a comfortable lead. Sometimes when you’re in that kind of position ... you feel like you’re in great shape when other people aren’t feeling as happy with what you’re doing.”

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-Diane Willis, member of CHALT

Additionally, Hemminger announced her candidacy only four months before the election. Usually, candidates will start planning about one year in advance. Because Hemminger launched her campaign so late, it could have limited the amount of preparation Kleinschmidt was able to put into his campaign. However, Willis does not think that was the case.

“I can’t say whether if he had walked through the neighborhoods that would’ve been beneficial to him,” she said. “If he had walked through my neighborhood, he might not have gotten a great reception because they’re all pretty angry.”

Kleinschmidt also did not want to blame his loss on his campaign. He said his campaign was run to the best of his abilities.

The former mayor had another advantage. He received endorsements from both The Indy Week and the Sierra Club, the former of which is generally considered a guarantee of victory. Hemminger’s campaign, however, did not allow these setbacks to inhibit them.

Brown said that they had already purchased a banner ad in the Indy by the time the endorsement was announced. Fortunately, the Indy had previously written nice things about Hemminger, calling her competent and qualified, so the newspaper's formal endorsement of Kleinschmidt was juxtapose with an add including its own positive quotes about Hemminger.

The state board of the Sierra Club chose not to endorse a candidate, but the local chapter endorsed Kleinschmidt because he supported high-density housing along transit routes.

"That was one challenge [of the campaign]," said Brown. "We had to make sure that people understood that it wasn't that she wouldn't have deserved the endorsement too, it was just that the criteria were a little more focused on specific things."

Kleinschmidt also had substantial popularity, especially with students, due to his passion for national issues, notably gun control, gay rights and the Syrian refugee crisis. Willis says because these are more universal issues, they resonate more with college students who come to Chapel Hill from around the country.

Local issues seemed to be more important in this election than national ones as Kleinschmidt's planning and developing choices were one of the main problems voters had with him. However, citizens may not be at a loss in terms of the other social issues though, as a dedication to social justice was a key aspect of Hemminger's platform.

Hemminger's campaign began with mobile meet-and-greets or "Listening Sessions." During these sessions, one resident would invite their neighbors over to talk with Hemminger in their home, said Brown. Listening Sessions were comprised of groups of 5-25 people, and around 35 were held across Chapel Hill.

While Hemminger decided to run because of "concern over the direction [the town is] heading," it was during these listening sessions that she solidified her platform. Key issues included affordable housing, environmental stewardship, and attracting commercial development.

These concerns were right in line with those of the citizenry. Chapel Hill resident Terry Vance said she was "dismayed by the town's lack of fiscal responsibility: use of tax

money for their own PR budget, pushing high-end residential development and ignoring the development we need: commercial and office space.”

Diversifying development is a key goal of Hemminger’s. She said non-traditional office space, with room for larger companies will be important for attracting the kind of companies that can make a difference in Chapel Hill.

Affordable housing is a concern across Chapel Hill. Vance said, “Affordable housing would allow folks who work here to be able to afford to live here.”

Hemminger’s campaign took a similar stance, also saying that it is important for people working in Chapel Hill to live in the town, so they have a say in future town policies and developments.

Problems with flooding are also a concern that Vance says the town has not begun to address.

While storm water management is important to Hemminger, she wants to take a broader approach to improve Chapel Hill’s relationship with its surrounding environment. Hemminger said she wants to encourage developers to build green and minimize the amount of impervious surfaces in the town.

Citizens of Chapel Hill were dissatisfied not only with the decisions of town leaderships, but also with their rhetoric. Willis recalled a Town Council meeting that she found particularly alienating.

The financing of the Ephesus-Fordham development was the last item on the roster, and Willis was at the meeting past the point much of the general public had left. Willis said the mayor called Ephesus-Fordham one of the gateways to Chapel Hill and emphasized the necessity of development. He then turned his attention to the media and demanded that they report on these developmental issues.

“At one point he was actually staring at me, and I thought, well he doesn’t know who I am, but he looks mad,” she said. “I thought- Wow, I’ve voted for this guy before, I didn’t know he had this other side to him, which was totally out of place.”

It seems the Listening Sessions that started Hemminger's campaign have paid off. Citizens were concerned that their town officials were not listening to them and Hemminger appears to be doing just that.

More than any endorsement or campaign strategies, developmental decisions and plans for the future of Chapel Hill swayed voters away from Kleinschmidt and in favor of a change.