

Vice Mayor Wisler leans in, takes over key roles

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Name a civic issue or initiative that's top of mind for Asheville residents, and chances are good that recently appointed Vice Mayor **Gwen Wisler** has one or both hands in it. That's because Wisler, who was elected to Asheville City Council in 2013, has emerged as a major force in Asheville city government since a new Council was seated at the end of last year. With three new members in — **Brian Haynes**, **Julie Mayfield** and **Keith Young** — and former Vice Mayor Marc Hunt out, Wisler became not only Mayor **Esther Manheimer**'s understudy, but also the chair of three pivotal Council committees.

Most of the issues that appear on City Council's meeting agendas have previously been vetted by one of six Council committees: Planning & Economic Development, Finance, Governance, Boards & Commissions, Housing & Community Development and Public Safety.

Before last year's Council reshuffling, Wisler sat on two of these committees: PED and Finance. Now she's chair of both. And as vice mayor, she chairs Boards & Commissions, which solicits and vets candidates for the city's volunteer citizen advisory boards.

In addition, Wisler was recently appointed to two more committees: Governance and Housing & Community Development.

Of the six pivotal Council committees, Public Safety is the only one she doesn't serve on — although she turned up in the audience at the most recent meeting of that committee on March 28.

But keeping up with five committees doesn't seem to be enough to keep the retired corporate executive's dance card full: She's also a voting member of the board of the Metropolitan Sewerage District and the French Broad River Metropolitan Planning Organization. Alongside those commitments, she serves as president of the Botanical Gardens at Asheville and teaches bicycle safety to local kids and adults.

At City Council's planning retreat in January, Wisler related her backstory: The daughter of an Ohio-based insurance salesman and a homemaker, Wisler was the third of four kids. Even though her grades placed her at the top of her class, she noted wryly, she only received \$500 in college scholarships, while boys her age received considerably more. After studying accounting at Ohio State University, she began her career as a certified public accountant at Price Waterhouse in Atlanta. From there, she went on to ascend to some pretty high places in the corporate world.

Among her top posts, Wisler was president and CEO of The Coleman Co., an \$800 million consumer products company. Before she moved to Asheville in 2006, she explained, the demands of her career kept her too busy for civic engagement. Once she and her husband, **Lee Pirtle**, got settled in their new city, Wisler founded Asheville Profits, a consulting practice that advises local entrepreneurs, who, in payment for high-powered business advice,



volunteer their time at community nonprofits. Wisler's search for additional ways to contribute her skills to the city led to her successful campaign for City Council in 2013.

In nominating Wisler as vice mayor on Dec. 1, Councilman **Gordon Smith** called her "a dove out in the community and a hawk when it comes to the budget." Wisler's financial management experience, says Manheimer, is the key to her "more technical approach" to the job of city government. The mayor also says she counts on Wisler, "a leader and a worker," to get the job done.

As a financially secure retiree, Wisler is not only willing to put a lot of time into meetings, community functions and research — she is able. Her colleagues on Council, on the other hand, all balance their official responsibilities with earning a living.

Xpress caught up with Wisler on a recent warm spring afternoon to get her take on her new roles and on the hot-button issues she's responsible for shepherding through the public process — including the city budget for fiscal year 2017, the community visioning process for the city's Haywood Street property and the upcoming citywide Comprehensive Plan update.

Xpress: Your journey to City Council and, now, to leadership roles within the Council hasn't followed some of the usual paths. How do you think your background shapes your approach to municipal government?

Wisler: For me, numbers are a way to look at issues. One of the reasons I ran was that I felt my business and financial background would be an asset to the Council. It's how I think about things. Beyond Council's shared objectives and values (which we articulated in our recent 2036 vision statement), I also look at things and ask, "Are we doing it the most effective and fiscally responsible way?" Because if we are spending the money in the best way, we'll have more for the things we need and want to do.

What are your goals for Asheville?

I want to continue to make Asheville livable and a great place to be. That's why I moved here. That's why a lot of people move here. I want Asheville to be a healthy community, and I mean that in a holistic way. Are we trying to sustain our lifestyle, are we making it a good place for a diverse group of people to live? Are things fair? Is it clean? Is it safe? Can you be healthy here? That's how I think about it.

How do you go about gathering information and making decisions?

I spend a lot of time reading issues papers. And that includes looking at how other cities handle some of the issues we face here in Asheville. I feel like I need to be prepared and to stay open to listening to all sides of the issue. It's easy to get locked in early, and I try to not do that. I may hear something that opens me back up and changes my mind on the issue. When I walk into the vote, I need to have good reasoning on why I am voting the way I am.

What do you wish more people understood about the city budget?

One of the perceptions is that there's a lot of discretionary money. When you look at the budget and what we spend it on, about half is public safety. After that comes environment and transportation, which include water, street maintenance and that kind of thing. Those two categories combined represent almost 70 percent of our funds. So I would say, get educated on where we spend the money.

For the coming fiscal year, the only thing that we've voted on yet is city fees. In setting the fees, we went through a deliberate process of looking at how services are used. I spent a lot of time [studying] the Nature Center and Aston Park, trying to come up with a plan that reflects the fact that these are not facilities that are used by or available to all of our population. I would like people to understand the logic of how we got to the increases we passed. I mean, I don't like to increase fees either. I would love to just sit back and give everything to everybody for free. Actually, maybe I wouldn't like that (*laughs*).

How about spending on the River Arts District Transportation Improvement Project?

We're spending a lot of money on RADTIP, and that's fine. Our local investment is offset by \$21 million in outside funds, most of which are federal. When municipalities get these types of grants, the vast majority of them require us to come up with some kind of match. We are leveraging federal money to open up the area by the river and to improve the quality of life in Asheville. From the city's perspective, the improvements are going to add a lot of value and increase the tax base. So I think it's a good investment, but it's a long-term play.

PED is responsible for overseeing the community visioning process for the city-owned properties on Haywood Street across from the U.S. Cellular Center and the Basilica of St. Lawrence. What would you personally like to see on that site?

I would just like to see *something*. I'm hoping that we facilitate a good public input process that yields good ideas. Then I want to see action. I hope it doesn't just continue to churn.

What else is PED involved with right now?

PED generally is charged with long-term planning, including land use and economic development. The biggest thing on our plate right now is the city's Comprehensive Plan update. I hope lots of people will get involved and we will see a big, communitywide effort to weigh in on how the city will do its business for the next 20 years. In any well-run organization, you need the overall plans to guide your day-to-day decisions. You're not just starting from scratch every day when you go to work. At the same time, we need to continue to honor existing city plans like, for example, the Greenways Master Plan. I want staff to continue to listen to the voices of those who have spent a lot of time developing those plans over the past few years.

What kinds of issues are you hearing about from constituents?

Well, this is Asheville, so there's always the issue of the day, but one of the things I hear a lot about is speeding. It may sound mundane, but it's a big quality-of-life and safety issue. When the city did a survey, we heard that the environment is very important to people in Asheville. And then, broadly, the issue of equity: What are we doing for our most disadvantaged residents? Affordable housing, transit, jobs, living wage and other issues related to equity are high up on the list.

Halfway through your term of office, what accomplishments are you most proud of?

Well, it's hard for me to take individual credit because no Council member is alone in the boat. I think we've made some big advances in greenways and I'm excited about RADTIP. We are moving forward in how we prioritize issues of equity. I'm happy we were able to add Sunday bus service and that we have increased funding for affordable housing. On a personal level, I bring a lens of fiscal responsibility and accountability to Council. I think that people expect me to be asking those questions, and I think they listen to my opinion when it comes to making sure we are using the money in the smartest way.

Closing thoughts?

For me, it is all about the work we're doing to make Asheville continue to be a great place and to become even better. People reach out to me a lot. I enjoy that, and I think it makes me do the work better, the more input I have. Call me, email me, whatever. I want to hear from you.

Constituents can reach Councilwoman Gwen Wisler at gwenwisler@avlcouncil.com or 828-333-1767.

