

## Behind the boards

# Asheville scrutinizes makeup of commissions

Despite increased  
interest, diversity lags

**DAVID FORBES**

ASHEVILLE BLADE

ASHEVILLE - The AC Hotel will rise nine stories above Broadway and College Avenue when workers put the finishing touches on the 132-room hotel.

As part of a hotel building boom downtown, the structure has been one reason why some residents have pushed City Council members to rein in hotel construction for fear the central business district is losing its character.

But the truth is council members – the elected officials beholden the public – didn't give the AC Hotel the go-ahead. Nor did they give a thumbs-up to the Hyatt Place near Montford or the City Centre hotel and office complex near City Hall itself.

A planning board of appointed community members did all that, just as groups made up of appointed members often make decisions that can affect daily life for residents in big and small ways.

The city of Asheville appoints people to 155 board and commission seats, crafting policy on everything from the new development near your home to police misconduct. The groups often work behind the scenes, though their decisions - like clearing the way for the AC Hotel - can have broad impact.

But city records reveal those boards are considerably whiter, likely wealthier and more male than the population of the city they represent.

The Asheville Blade obtained rec-

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# Boards

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ords of applications to all the city's boards and commissions in late February, and in collaboration with the Citizen-Times has provided them to the public along with a database summing up the information.

While applications have increased in recent years, according to city officials, that divide remains on the 30 commissions Asheville City Council appoints members to.

Of the 155 positions, 15 are occupied by African-Americans, and three of those are appointments to the city and county's joint African-American Heritage Commission. Fifty-four of the positions — just over a third — are occupied by women, though they comprise 54 percent of the city's population.

"One thing I think we really struggle with is diversity," said **Vice Mayor Gwen Wisler**, who oversees board appointments. She adds that the city needs to do a better job of getting the word out to more populations about open board positions. "We're simply struggling to make a diverse group of people know about them."

While roughly half of Asheville residents are renters and many work in the service or retail industry, the ranks of the city's board members have a large number of business owners, Realtors, attorneys, planners, architects and others in generally higher-paying fields.

Of the members, at least 25 are business owners in some capacity, 11 are attorneys, 23 are directly involved in development (including Realtors, architects and planners) and such professional backgrounds are also heavily represented among the 27 retirees on the city's commissions.

While some of those are due to positions specifically set up for someone with technical expertise in a given field (such as land planning or real estate), well-off professionals are also heavily represented in board positions with no specific requirements.

## Looking for volunteers

Council member Keith Young, who's repeatedly raised the issue of representation on the boards at City Council's annual retreat and elsewhere, says it's slow going.

"I try to make a decent effort of appointing members who are qualified but who also bring a different perspective, that are minorities," he said. "But it's a slow process, we need to get more communities involved."

Council members need to get the word out when there are seats to be filled on the boards and commissions, **Wisler** said.

"When we look at appointments, we need to try to appoint a more diverse group," she said. "We're not going to appoint people just for the sake, but we are looking at diversity."

Young, along with **Wisler** and council member Gordon Smith, serves on the council committee that assesses board applications. He



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said he believes the times the commissions meet — often in the middle of the day — can also pose a barrier to those with tight work schedules and skew things towards those with more time and resources.

"A lot of people that would do a lot of good work on these boards and commissions simply can't be there due to the nature of their job," he says. "They don't have time to take an hour lunch or they have to pick up their kids at three in the afternoon. It's very hard to find good people to serve these positions."

Young notes that council is preparing to commit nearly \$500,000 to a detailed study of how its policies, including with boards and commissions, affect equity and how they might need to change. Part of that funding is for a staff member to oversee reforms.

"It is a more concrete push," he said. "It is

something that needs to happen."

## A hidden power

City Clerk Maggie Burleson estimates that lately the city receives 80 to 100 applications for commissions per year, though that rises when spots on high-profile entities like the school board or Planning and Zoning open up.

Since Burleson started overseeing the process in 1995, the city added race, gender, age and area of city to the information on board applications, "requested for the sole purpose of assuring that a cross-section of the community is appointed" as the official city form says.

The numbers do not include subcommittees or temporary city committees convened just to decide on a single issue (like the fate of the property across from the Basilica of St. Lawrence). The records were obtained Feb. 22, and

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**COUNCIL MEMBER KEITH YOUNG**

do not include some new members appointed, or members who stepped down.

While these groups don't often get much notice, there's hardly any part of the city or its residents' lives they don't affect, from planning to air quality to the police.

By the time a controversial policy makes it to Asheville City Council 's chambers, a board or commission helped craft it. In some cases, they make final decisions directly.

“Boards and commissions really REALLY can help influence policy in many ways,” Burlleson writes, emphasizing their importance.

Any significant issue goes to a board or commission first, Wisler said.

“That's a decision by council and by staff that these issues get vetted before they come to us.”

Some commissions are required by state law, some jointly held with other local governments, others formed by local leaders to deal with specific issues like the riverfront or sustainability.

Others have seats reserved for private groups like the Asheville Downtown Association, local colleges, the Council of Independent Business Owners and the Chamber of Commerce. Some seats require specific technical knowledge, property ownership or a certain profession.

The number of boards and commissions, and the range of people involved in them, show a thriving civic culture, Wisler claims.

“I think it's a real tribute to Asheville's engaged and active citizenry.”

As Asheville's population grows, the costs of housing skyrocket and concerns about everything from de facto segregation to the pace of development emerge, the boards have received more attention — and controversy.

Over the last year, both the public and local leaders have also debated the powers of the Civil Service Board, which can reverse many actions involving city workers; the Planning and Zoning Commission, which can approve some major developments downtown without going to council; and the Tourism Development Authority, a joint city-county board that controls hotel tax revenue.

Because the city's Council and mayor are part-time positions, and because the policies of

Asheville's government deal with so many different areas, boards and commissions and the locals who occupy them are often the first to draft out new laws or major changes.

In 2010, for example, council gave the planning board major power when it allowed it to sign off on all but the largest developments downtown. Since then it's been that commission — not council — that's approved a number of controversial projects. Though those decisions can occasionally be appealed on narrow technical grounds, in many cases the planning commission effectively makes the final call.

“One of the things these boards and commissions do is look at these issues in-depth,” Wisler says. “They look at alternatives, and that comes forward to council.”

Council's January retreat saw further debates, as Young brought up the lack of diversity while City Manager Gary Jackson said he felt some board members were pushing to exceed their powers, though he didn't specify which ones.

Most of the time, a potential member submits an application to Burlleson, who encourages them to attend several meetings first. The council committee then narrows the applications down before City Council as a whole interviews the remaining applicants and the local leaders (or, in a few cases, the mayor) decide whom to appoint.

The terms vary by board and, while not a formal policy, council will generally reappoint a board member who wishes to serve a second term, especially if there's a dearth of applications.

But recently, the number of applications has shot up, Wisler notes.

“We're to the point where we limit someone to two boards and commissions, there's so much interest in these various topics,” she says.

One open seat on the Downtown Commission attracted no less than 15 applicants this January, and council agreed many of them were highly qualified.

But right now the city has no firm plans to alter the powers of any boards, Wisler notes, though “there have definitely been discussions” about changing the general practice of reappointing current board members in the case of high profile boards attracting a large number of applicants.

“If people have suggestions of how we can do a better job, I'd love to hear it.”

#### **The view from the boards**

Kim Roney had a long history of activism and community organizing before she sent in her first board application last year.

Now Roney, who relies on the bus to get around town, sits on the city's Multimodal Transportation Commission, which deals with everything from sidewalks to transit routes.

“Because it's a volunteer position, and because the meetings are usually held in the afternoons, it's not convenient for working class people, for families, for people in the service industry,” Roney says of her reasons for apply-

ing. “I feel like it's a duty of mine because I'm able. I'm there for all the people who can't be there.”

She said she talks extensively with people in her community about the issues the commission faces in an effort to represent them better. In the three months she's served on the board, she's cast two dissenting votes on that basis: against the Asheville in Motion plan and against renewing a management company contract for the transit system.

In those cases, Roney asserts, she felt that staff failed to take into account the needs of marginalized communities or concerns about the state of the transit system due to major controversies.

In the latter case, she said the transit employees union and rider advocates had raised issues with current management company First Transit, from late buses to bad maintenance and poor working conditions.

On the multimodal commission, Roney was the sole dissenting vote on the nine-member board. But when the contract was sent to the transit committee, a subcommittee of the multimodal board where most of the members are bus riders, for more specific review, she was part of a majority of six members that rejected it in favor of a different bid by McDonald Transit, while three members abstained.

“I'm not seeing the needs met where working class families live and really need help with infrastructure,” she explains. “It feels like I'm being pitched something [by staff] and I realize that's a really harsh way to describe the diligent work our city officials are doing, but I'm more likely to be critical. I want the city to be better.”

Jane Mathews, a local architect on the city's Riverfront Redevelopment Commission, has served on multiple city boards, including nine years on the powerful Planning and Zoning Commission over the course of three decades. She first became involved while helping to craft the city's development ordinances in the early '90s.

“The roles are different for each commission,” she said. When she served on the city's sustainability committee, the board crafted a policy that the city later adopted and put into practice. “I think it's a great way for people to contribute back to the city.”

She said she believes that while diversity remains an issue, it's improved during her time on city boards and the city advertises positions more than it did when she first started.

“You're getting a lot of people who are relatively recent additions,” Mathews said.

“In '92 when I was first appointed, I don't believe I even went through an interview process,” she said. “Now there's a lot more questions, information.”

In general, staff have mostly done “a very good job” of laying out information and seeking input, Mathews said, though she's also observed cases where residents brought forward important information city officials hadn't considered.

“It's always a mixed bag,” she said.