

2007 Birmingham City Commission Candidate Forum

Birmingham City Manager

- What are the three most significant attributes and skills that you will be looking for in the next City Manager in the event you are elected?
- What past experience do you feel is most important to the future success of Birmingham's new City Manager?
- What degree of autonomy would you give the City Manager?

S. Chavetz: City manager - extensive background in finance, an ability to remain neutral when giving information and listening to all sides of an issue, experience with infrastructure maintenance and renewal. Experience - With balancing the needs of the commercial districts with the needs of residential districts. Autonomy - The manager will be encouraged to share his opinion, expertise, thoughts, ideas and concerns with the City Commission FREELY.

G. Dilgard: Three significant required attributes and skills are: deep experience in municipal finance and administration; effective communications with a broad range of individuals and organizations; and a proactive approach to problems and opportunities.

Past experience as a City Manager of a comparable city would be very beneficial.

The current degree of autonomy of the City Manager has worked relatively well. There will be a learning curve for any new manager. I would expect the City Commission to initially ask more questions on various items.

T. McDaniel: The next City Manager must have a proven track record of successfully managing municipal operations and effectively leading a large group of employees; a thorough understanding of municipal finances; and an ability to work with the larger community. He/she must also have reasonable expectations regarding the level of salary and benefits the City can pay.

The new City Manager must have a proven ability to lead effectively in an environment similar to Birmingham, where citizens are active, passionate and vocal about their City.

The new City Manager will have the same degree of autonomy that Tom Markus enjoys, i.e., he/she will have full responsibility for the day-to-day operations of the City. The City Manager will continue to report to, and take direction from, the Commission, which will—as always—set policy and establish priorities for the City.

S. Moore: The next commission will at some point determine, after much discussion with each other, together the attributes and experience we will be looking for in a new City Manager. I do not believe it positive to discuss the same at this juncture.

Birmingham has traditionally followed the customary principles for a Council/Manager system of government. Essentially, the Commission is the Board of Directors that sets policy and the City Manager is its CEO. Oftentimes this becomes a delicate, but respectful balance. More often than not, municipalities that find themselves in turmoil have largely violated this separation of responsibilities.

G. Rinschler:

1. Technical Competence – demonstrated expertise in finance, planning, operations management, public project management, cost control, and the complexities of governing a combined urban and residential community.
2. Leadership – An open and honest style that, whenever possible, employs a collaborative approach that embraces the talents of a very involved community.
3. Passion – A clearly demonstrated desire to serve the community and act in the long term interests of all stakeholders.

Demonstrated success managing growth in a mixed urban/suburban setting.

After a short “break in” period, the new City Manager should be allowed to run the City’s day-to-day operations without meddling from City Commission. City Commission should work jointly with the City Manager to set policy, direction, and specific goals. The City Manager should execute that direction and be held accountable for meeting those goals.

S. Weisberg:

1. Experience that shows promise and financial dexterity in dealing with a city that is an established suburban center.
2. Strength of leadership and the ability to balance role and duties as a manager and follow the lead of the commission.
3. Demonstrates appreciation for maintaining a healthy infrastructure in order to attract and respect business and commerce.

The managerial and departmental structure in Birmingham has been relatively stable for many years. There is strong indication that things will be changing as long-time employees and directors begin to retire. The next city manager must have proven success in bringing a management team together and in providing mentoring and building leadership.

In our structure of government, a city manager must know that they have great autonomy to carry out the policies implemented by the Commission. City commissioners are elected not for their expertise in management, but for their ability to fairly represent their constituents and provide direction and oversight to the city manager. The commission, as a body, must be clear and unified in their direction to the manager then stay out of the way and let the manager do the job for which they are hired.

State and Local Economy

- Where do you see the economy going in the next 4 years?
- What impact will that have on Birmingham?
- How is this view going to affect the decisions you make as a Commissioner?

S.Chavetz: The economy will be more diversified than currently. Birmingham does not rely as heavily on the automotive industry as much as some cities, and with our unique downtown and neighborhoods it will be a destination for innovative business, retail, and potential homeowners.

G. Dilgard: There is a wide range of views by economists over what will happen with the economy over the next six months, so forecasting where we will be in four years is speculative. Currently, oil is over \$90 a barrel and the housing and related financial markets appear to be in difficulty through at least next year.

In four years I would expect the state budget to be in much better shape. This should at least help stabilize the revenue sharing received by Birmingham.

Given the short and long term uncertainty, the City Commission will continue to budget and spend prudently.

T. McDaniel: It is difficult to be anything other than pessimistic about the next four years; I think that Michigan will continue to rank at or near the bottom in almost every economic category, an outcome virtually assured by the total lack of leadership and vision in Lansing. Locally, southeast Michigan is relatively worse off than the rest of the State and the outlook for improvement is not much different.

In the midst of this economic gloom, Birmingham continues to do very well commercially. We have a large concentration of banking, financial services, and other office activity, which lifts our local economy, and helps sustain our downtown retail and restaurant establishments.

We must continue to make Birmingham a great place to do business and to visit. As we have done for the last 4 years, we must welcome new investment and work positively with investors to ensure high quality development. We cannot afford to lose opportunities to increase our tax base, which helps to contain our residential property taxes and ensure that the City will be able to continue the high level of services we all enjoy.

S. Moore: The near future will be challenging in terms of developing strategies to replace our aging infrastructure and in promoting economic development.

Birmingham is part of a major economic region that is in competition globally and which is in a period of generational transition.

The next Commission will be centered on doing what is necessary to maintain the desirability of its residential neighborhoods and the vitality of its business district. Additionally, Birmingham will need to think and act beyond its borders in terms of supporting such issues as regional mass transportation and the consolidation and/or sharing of services.

G. Rinschler: For Michigan, I expect the decline in the manufacturing sector will continue, but level off; while growth in the “high tech” sector should continue. The outlook for Oakland County is brighter than the state as a whole due mainly to growth in technology related jobs. Local economic growth should be modest, but significant.

Birmingham has been minimally impacted by job losses in the manufacturing sector, and is well positioned to attract the highly educated workers and their families who are coming to Oakland County to fill jobs in the growing “high tech” sector. There clearly is an opportunity for Birmingham to prosper in this environment, but only if we continue to build on our recent successes.

Now is a time to invest in ourselves. I would use Birmingham’s very strong financial position to invest in parks, infrastructure, and public spaces; while leveraging our very strong image to encourage public/private partnerships as well as private investment in the Central Business District, the Triangle District, and the Rail District.

S. Weisberg: The economy will continue to struggle over the next four years, and Michigan will lag significantly behind any upturns on the federal level. The local economy has shown more promise as Oakland County embraces technology and service industries aggressively.

Birmingham tends to be slightly insulated from the ravages elsewhere in the state, but we feel a significant impact as we try to attract scarce investment dollars and as new homeowners are priced out of the market because of the impact of property taxes.

Birmingham is in a strong financial position and can therefore attract interesting opportunities. I would encourage private/public partnerships as we develop the Rail and Triangle districts and as we continue to improve existing infrastructure. The commission should consider employing a retail consultant to get regional type stores. As a commissioner, I expect to think outside the box to create opportunities to make us more attractive to investors and homeowners alike.

Shain Park

The decision by the voters to move forward on Shain Park to include underground parking was made some time ago. The economy is not what it was then.

- Do you feel we should move forward with the project? Why or why not?

S.Chavetz: Unless the underground parking deck bids come in for less than \$9.8 million as the bond dictates, we need to stop the underground parking deck. No one can afford the cost of additional taxes to pay off the debt from the proposed underground parking structure.

We should proceed with expanding Shain Park if we can offer adequate parking for both the Townsend and the Community House and provide a park that is worthy of our downtown yet low on maintenance costs.

G. Dilgard: The Shain Park parking facility bond question was passed by 60% of the voters just last year. The structure will be financed by the Automobile Parking System. Next year the bonds for the Chester Parking Structure will be paid off freeing the cash flow for the Shain structure.

Birmingham will be facing much stronger competition from new destination developments at Bloomfield Park and The Pavilions at the former Kmart site in Troy. We must invest in expanding and enhancing our civic center to attract people and events. This is a major goal of the 2016 Plan and the urgency for doing this is even greater today.

T. McDaniel: When the voters said yes to underground parking in order to expand Shain Park, signs of economic problems were plentiful, yet nearly 60% of the voters approved the \$9.8 million bond issue. No Commissioner can ignore such an overwhelming endorsement; clearly, Birmingham residents want a bigger, more beautiful town square. We have design work to finish and bids to solicit, and then we'll take a look at final costs and projected revenues and make our decision. I lean strongly in favor of going ahead and will work to find creative solutions to roadblocks we may face at that time.

S. Moore: I remain fully committed to a new and expanded Shain Park. As planned, it will be both beautiful and functional, and will add to the quality and vibrancy of our downtown. A vital downtown bears a strong relation to residential values. The bond proposal for the underground parking assumed a price tag of 9.8 million to be paid from money other than property taxes. If competitive bids come in higher (putting undue additional pressure on the parking system or business), the Commission and its citizens will need to reevaluate the venture in terms of scope and /or timing.

G. Rinschler: The decision by the voters to move forward on Shain Park to include underground parking was made some time ago. The economy is not what it was then.

YES! We should move forward with the new Shain Park that nearly 60% of the voters approved on February 28, 2006. Then, the Dow Jones Industrial Average was \$11,000, now it is a record \$14,000. Then, the decline in the manufacturing sector was at its peak. Then, the housing bubble had already burst. – I disagree with the premise of the question that the election has somehow been disqualified by a dramatic change in the environment. I believe our citizens recognize that we must invest in parks and infrastructure in good times and bad if we are to continue to prosper. Shain Park is a long term investment in making Birmingham even better than it is already. It is the single most important action to enhance our downtown and keep Birmingham one step ahead of surrounding communities

who are competing for the hearts and pocketbooks of home buyers, merchants, and investors. We cannot become complacent - now is the time to move forward!

S. Weisberg: This is exactly the time to be improving Shain Park. Birmingham is in competition for the hearts and pocketbooks of home buyers and business investors. Our city deserves a beautiful civic center that will encourage downtown living and draw shoppers from our surrounding communities. The expansion and improvement of Shain Park has been on the city's agenda for more than 10 years. I fully support continuing the project. The voter- approved bond issue authorizing \$9.8 million will be totally paid by the Automobile Parking Fund - not taxpayers' dollars.

Birmingham Politics

Birmingham politics have been described as contentious and extreme; pro-growth, no-growth

- Are you pro-growth or no-growth? If you are pro-growth, what kind of growth would you like to see in Birmingham?
- What is your position on more density/higher buildings?
- Describe your vision of Birmingham in 10 years.

S.Chavetz: Labeling people is part of what stirs up contentiousness in our city. I am very much for the continued growth and success of not only our downtown proper but also the Eton Rd Corridor, the Triangle District, and the frontage along Woodward South of Lincoln.

I have a concern to maintain a balance between retail, office and residential development. I would like to see more residential that actually serves to put people on the streets of our downtown and live year round in Birmingham.

The closer to the heart of the downtown there should be more density, the outsides should serve as a buffer, a great example is the outstanding "Brownstones" along Brown Street. More than the height of the building is the use, office needs to have some limits as the parking demands are extensive, residential needs to be provided and I am willing to go higher for more density of residential downtown.

The neighborhoods will be as wonderful as ever, with streets improved and the sewer work finished. Parks will be finished and will serve to help maintain our strong property values. Downtown will have an eclectic flavor with one or a kind retail, small innovative restaurants, and along with our successful long time restaurants, entertainment and retail will serve to put people on the streets.

G. Dilgard: The question of growth or no-growth is a tired one and not helpful. Birmingham has been growing and evolving since the 1800's. The development I support will be balanced and done in context with the existing buildings, streets and neighborhoods. Our goal should be for Birmingham to be a walkable, bike friendly community that encourages a sustainable living environment.

As a member of the Planning Board, I was involved in developing the Master Plan for the Triangle District. Taller buildings are allowed near the busy, higher density Woodward Avenue corridor. The allowed heights step down as the development approaches single family residential neighborhoods. This is an example of balanced, contextual planning and development.

T. McDaniel: I am pro-growth; no growth is a roadmap to municipal disaster! Birmingham is in great shape today because it has been allowed to evolve and grow in a rational way. Birmingham has been fortunate to attract high quality development, characterized by some truly outstanding architecture – and I want to see this continue into the future.

I think the matter of density and building heights have been very well defined during the last four years by the necessary changes to our ordinances in the downtown area, as well as by the Rail and Triangle District plans. While I believe that we have set the right template for future development in these areas, we must be very careful with the interface between our commercial and residential areas, and make sure that we get the right density and building mass on "the edges".

I envision a Birmingham 10 years hence that remains a walkable, economically vibrant city, with beautiful neighborhoods and a downtown that is a regional, even national destination for its retail stores, restaurants and hospitality— more of all the things that we have today. The only differences would be a bigger and much more beautiful town square (Shain Park), a beautiful “central park” (Barnum Park), a community recreation facility and an up-to-date city infrastructure.

S. Moore: Birmingham has defined itself as a small city with small town characteristics. I support quality development in our City.

Birmingham’s residential neighborhoods are a healthy mix of urban and small town charm, and the downtown has become a regional destination in terms of civic, business and entertainment use. Recently, downtown height restrictions and the residential building code were reworked. Birmingham continues to adhere to the 2016 plan, and has created master plans for the Eton Corridor and Triangle District. I anticipate more density in the Eton Corridor and higher heights and density in the Triangle District.

Birmingham’s future is bright.

G. Rinschler: Neither, I am “Pro-Birmingham”! I support growth that increases our residential population downtown and in the Triangle District. I also recognize the importance of preserving the character of our single family residential neighborhoods.

I support the recent zoning ordinance changes that encourage residential components in new construction downtown and in the Triangle District.

I see a prosperous City with a thriving downtown housing an ever growing number of people living there as well as in the Triangle District. I also see strong neighborhoods with high property values that have had their desirability improved by continued investment in parks, public spaces, schools and commercial/residential buildings. I see Birmingham as an even better place than it is today!

S. Weisberg: I am pro-smart growth, as we have practiced over the past four years. I want to see growth that respects the residential areas while adding value to the community as a destination area.

I support the general direction of the 2016 plan and that there are areas and opportunities for density. Birmingham is very adept at drawing upon the expertise and opinions of all the stakeholders so that planned progress is sensitive to residents and business alike.

I see Birmingham as a thriving suburban destination that has independent neighborhoods and varied centers of commerce. I see a community of interesting and diversified housing, successful schools and a social and cultural presence.

Barnum Park

The city has earmarked \$1.5 million to tear down part or all of the Barnum School starting July 2008.

- How do you envision the final layout of the park?
- Do you agree with demolishing the school or part of the school? Would you encourage residential development instead?

S.Chavetz: Barnum Park will serve as a neighborhood park and recreational destination with soccer fields, softball and other sports. There will be landscaping and trees but with thought to keep maintenance costs low.

There has been no consensus on what use the school would serve for the community and no options to pay for the upkeep and use of the building

Redeveloping the school with single family homes is a fiscally enticing option but that would be - by charter- decided by a vote of the residents. I doubt that such a ballot proposal would ever pass no matter how much sense it makes financially.

G. Dilgard: \$1.5 million earmarked for Barnum Park includes both demolition and the initial phase of the park development. Recently, the City Commission approved a contract with the landscape architectural firm to help facilitate public input for the park design. That process will take a number of months.

The decision was made by the City Commission earlier this year to remove all of the existing structures. I see no reason to revisit that decision.

T. McDaniel: My vision for the layout of Barnum Park is irrelevant. What is important is the community's collective vision for the park, and we are about to launch a process to find out what that vision is.

I do agree—and have voted, along with 4 other Commissioners—with demolishing all of the school buildings. If an offer of private funds to restore the original 1912 building develops, I certainly would still consider that option. Otherwise, once Beaumont's lease runs out next summer, the sooner all the buildings are demolished, the better. And, no, I did not and will not support residential development on any of the Barnum property. I voted instead for adding to the City's inventory of green space – the "all Park" option.

S. Moore: A process has been developed to design a community park. The result of that process will be a beautiful multi-purposed park. I would hope over time that the park, in terms of use and perception, will become partnered with a joint YMCA/Birmingham Community Center, a redesigned St. James Park and Howarth Park, adding character to the surrounding neighborhoods. I voted to demolish the building and use the space as a Park. Originally, I would have liked the facility or its replacement to be used for some sort of senior housing, but this proved not to be practical.

G. Rinschler: There is a public process to define the layout as well as recreational features of the park. I would not want to second guess the outcome.

That battle has been waged and won or lost depending on your point of view. The City is proceeding to build an 8 acre park on the site for use by the entire community.

S. Weisberg: Barnum is designated a community park and as such I believe the final layout will be a consensus of wants and needs from the entire community. I understand that the park will include recreation and gardens, and expect other needs will be considered such as a dog park area. One community member mentioned the possibility of a community garden at Barnum, which I think would be a wonderful opportunity to encourage educational participation with the surrounding schools.

I am sorry to see the 1912 portion of the school demolished. I believe keeping a portion of that building adds to historical relevance of the park. I understand there are plans formulating to use some of the building's features in the park design, such as the fireplace tiles. The concept of residential development on a portion of the Barnum park acreage has been rejected and I would not deem to take us back down that road.