

7th District City Council Appointment Applicant Questionnaire

Applicant Name: Matthew A.
Conrad

1. Why do you feel you are the best candidate for the 7th District appointment?
Describe your qualifications.

I have a professional and community service background that will equip me for the work of a City councilperson in ways that are unmatched by any other applicant. As a former prosecutor and later as a commercial real estate attorney, I will require no on the job training for two of City government's greatest responsibilities: public safety and land use. As a former substitute teacher, I also understand the role and needs of public educators. As a former director of community development, I led the revitalization of a blighted neighborhood in Central Virginia. My current occupation is focused almost exclusively on the legislative process, the chief role of Richmond's City Council under the new charter.

To my knowledge, I am also the only applicant who currently serves as an officer in a Seventh District civic association. I have the pleasure of serving both as president of Union Hill Civic Association and on the board of directors of the Church Hill Association.

Perhaps more importantly, I would bring new energy and ideas to the office. I am pursuing the position of appointed Seventh District Councilperson free from allegiances or agendas. I hope that you will allow me this opportunity to put my energy and enthusiasm to work for the people of the East End.

1. What made you decide to seek the appointment?

As I have told many of you in person, I had a relatively traumatic experience in the neighborhood over a year ago. Rather than leaving, that experience forged my commitment to pursuing real change for the better for the entire district. I became president of my civic association, organized neighborhood forums, partnered with law enforcement and became engaged in all of the pressing issues facing the district. Over the past year, I have worked on the rezoning of the East End, pursued old and historic designation for Union Hill and strived to make East End voices heard on all major development projects in our vicinity. During the term of this interim appointment, all of those issues will require action by City Council. I want to use my expertise on those issues and collaborative style to ensure the best result for the Seventh District.

I am also very enthusiastic about this specific point in our city's history. I believe we can finally move past the territoriality and personalities that have held back progress in Richmond. I look forward to the opportunity to contribute to that progress.

1. How long have you been a resident of the City and the 7th District?

I moved to Richmond in 2001, but have been a resident of the City for 5 years, three of which I have spent in the Seventh District. During my entire three-year tenure in law school I intended to return to the City to begin my career. Richmond is not only my home, but is also the birthplace of my mother, my grandmother and generations of my family.

1. If appointed, what do you feel to be your greatest duty and/or role as a Councilperson? What do you consider to be your greatest strengths or assets that will assist you in your role as Councilperson?

My greatest duty will be to facilitate communication and to help foster a sense of unity of purpose in City government. I will keep open channels of communication both with the constituents of the district and with the Administration. I think my greatest strength is my understanding that being a City Councilperson is about service and not about power. All of our City's leaders must bring with them humility of service that recognizes they are not individually vested with all of the authority and they do not have all of the ideas. I know that each of you share that view and, if given this opportunity, I look forward to working together in the common interest of our constituents.

1. Do you have any intention to run for the 7th District seat in the November 2009 election? If so, why do you intend to run?
If not, why would you forego running in November?

I do not intend to run for this seat in the 2009 election. I believe that serving in this appointed capacity is an opportunity to put my talents to work for the people of my district and to ensure that capable leadership is in place while they select an elected representative free from the undue influence an appointed incumbent would bring.

1. To what extent have you been involved in your community such as civic associations, non profits, etc.?

I currently serve as president of the Union Hill Civic Association and also serve on the Church Hill Association board of directors. In those capacities I have organized monthly meetings, conducted regular dialogues with the First Precinct, and deliberated many of the most pressing issues of the Seventh District, including development issues, rezoning, and preservation. I have led our neighborhood's pursuit of city old and historic status through the Union Hill Historic District Initiative.

I am also very active in my church, East End Fellowship and contribute to its activities throughout the East End, including Church Hill Activities and Tutoring.

1. What specific needs do you see in the 7th District? How do you plan to address these issues?

Our district is extraordinarily diverse culturally, ethnically, and socio-economically. Nonetheless, there are basic needs shared by all groups that are either going unmet or could use improvement. At the top of the list of priorities has to be education. It is a basic function of local government to provide a safe and challenging environment in which young minds can flourish. I believe our city is at a point of new beginning where new and exciting things are possible and old divisions have fallen away. I look forward to working closely with our school board member, Don Coleman, to find ways to improve attendance, graduation rates, and alternative funding sources.

The Seventh District suffers from woefully inadequate basic city infrastructure, including streets and sidewalks. Within my first month of service on city council, I plan to thoroughly catalogue those needs and to create a list of priorities to deliver to the Department of Public Works.

I also believe that former Chief Monroe was correct about the use of community policing models to fight crime. The Seventh District has an imbalance with respect to civic association representation. Neighborhoods on the south and west of the district have active associations that are in constant communication with leadership at the First Precinct. Before finishing the interim term, I hope to reestablish strong civic associations in the north of Church Hill and Oakwood by convening neighborhood specific meetings of all stakeholders. To that end, I have already spoken to interested persons who would be willing to spearhead the organizational effort.

Finally, economic development is the engine that makes all of these goals possible. As a Council, we need to do more to encourage businesses to come to the City, rather than driving them into the surrounding counties. I have heard many of my neighbors remark that City bureaucracy is the greatest impediment businesses face when attempting to locate here. My district desperately needs jobs and access to goods and services. I propose an ambitious review of all matters that impede economic development, from parking to permitting, and forming a commission to streamline any necessary permitting processes and to remove unnecessary road blocks to development.

1. What method of constituent outreach will you employ? How do you plan to inform your constituents of major city-wide issues and how will you proceed with their feedback?

As a part of my civic association duties, I have effectively used both electronic and traditional forms of communication to reach my neighbors. I send e-mail communications to both Union Hill and Church Hill residents and post our events on the neighborhood blog. Understanding that many of our residents do not use e-mail, I have on many occasions gone door-to-door to disseminate information.

If appointed to this position, I pledge to publish a newsletter at least monthly, using the Church Hill Association newsletter, e-mail, the Free Press, Facebook, and our neighborhood blog Church Hill People's News.

1. What are your expectations of the time demands of service on City Council and how will you meet them?

I know what it means to be a public servant: it is an around-the-clock job. I have seen this firsthand with my own family. My father serves as chairman of the board of supervisors for a rural Virginia county. It is common for him to receive phone calls at all hours of the day and night and for him to spend as much time serving his community as he does serving his employer, if not more. I fully expect the same level of dedication and service from myself. I both welcome that opportunity and have the energy to meet the task.

Fortunately, my current employer also understands what it means to be a public servant and to do so specifically for our city. Rob Jones has served two times as an appointed city councilperson and is willing to afford me all the time required to serve effectively in this position, if I am appointed.

1. What is your understanding of the role of the Mayor, the City Administration, and City Council under this form of government? How will you work with the Administration to see that the needs of your constituents and the needs of the City are met?

This form of government relies on a balance of powers, much like our federal system. Under Section 5.01 of the Charter, the Mayor is the chief administrative officer of the City and, as such, is charged with the day-to-day administration of government. Section 4.02 of the Charter makes clear that all other powers not expressly granted to another branch shall be exercised by the Council. As such, Council is the legislative and policy setting body for the City.

At the first meeting of Council, Mayor Jones promised to either attend each Council meeting himself or to send a representative on his behalf. This is an excellent sign that the doors of communication are open. I would seek the same level of communication with the Mayor and would expect to work collaboratively with him to meet the needs of our common constituents.

It should not be forgotten that the Mayor and Don Coleman also represent the Seventh District. The citizens of the East End may have three people representing them in city government, but they do not have three sets of needs. It is in the interest of the Mayor, Council and the School Board to work collaboratively to see that those needs are met in timely and efficient ways.