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Interview with Robin Cape, Asheville City Council Member  
Community Arts Project 310  
Jerry Pope, Professor  

C: Can you tell me how long you have been in Asheville and how long you have been on city council?  

R: I have lived in Asheville for twenty years umm actually 19 this year I am going on my 20th year I have been on city council for two years  

C: And what drew you to Asheville?  

R: ummm friends and family history.  

C: and what is your job with city council, like what do you do for city council?  

R: ummm, city council is the representative arm of citizens in the voice of government so what we do is we are elected representatives, and what I do is focus my time and energy on researching and understanding the complexity of the issues. Not simply representing a single voice in the community but looking out for all the interest in the community, whether they are people, who have the time to be active, or people who are struggling to make a living or people who have businesses or people who are aged.  

C are these all legal issues that you guys look at, things that you voted on, or do you look at community issues as well?  

R: ummmm of course our job is community issues there is nothing legal...that’s a funny word I wouldn’t know how to...  

C: Well I guess I mean just like the issues that one would vote on like voting for example zoning or do you look at issues that are umm for example we talked a little bit in class with Heather Rayburn about staples command of the community and there was some folks that wanted the staples sigh to blend more with the artistic values that Asheville holds. But staples just wanted their traditional staples sign. I don’t think that’s a legal issue, at all  

R: Well it all comes the only way we can deal with it is as a legal issue. If we have a sigh ordinance that says this is what your sign needs to be there’s no way we can force them to make it more artistic. Most of the laws in the state of North Carolina do not give you aesthetic dominance over some one else. So I can’t go to you and say that your house is painted white. I what you to paint it purple because I think that’s more aesthetic. That’s not something that the state of North Carolina gives us the legal right to do even in an ordinance option. We have to be really careful about what legal requirements. The way I look at it is ummm we should be legislating things that are about the health and safety of
people. And the positive growth of the community not the likes and dislikes of individuals, where does that stop? If you dislike of individuals, if you dislike the color purple or you dislike a plain sign, what happens when you start disliking a group of people? You know? So where in the country of America do we want the government to go? Personally I have always been a very active person in terms of trying to live my life responsibly and from a values base. I value freedom. Very much value freedom. Don’t think I would do well in a country where I would have to get permission for everything I wanted to do. It’s really complicated in a city where you have 75 thousand people living together how you make a balance between what makes a good living arrangement between 75 thousand people. And what allows people the freedom that was the basis of why America was founded. Does it mean that every single thing a business man of a developer wants to be can be absolutely legislative by the likes and dislikes of every community member? I personally don’t believe so.

C: That’s a really, sounds like a crucial issue when you talk about developing. Because there are folks that what to develop and folks that don’t. Sounds like there’s all these different...

R: well those are more infrastructures. All those questions can be answered in my mind from an infrastructure sustainability measure. Aesthetics is not sustainability. If you want a black striped jacket and I don’t that’s not gonna mean the earth doesn’t function tomorrow. In less the jacket was made from the skin of some precious animal. Then we could start saying how is that going to affect the health of our overall community. So you have got to be really careful, I believe, and this is just what I am coming to, I really respect the process and foundation of maybe where Americas coming from in my world value historical perspective. What is America about? It’s not about people coming in and raping and pillaging and having everything they want. It’s not about having everything dictated to you about what you can and can’t do. There is a balance in there. And I try as a city council representative, to listen to the myriad of voices that filter through me. Through my computer. Through the phone calls. Through the conversations that I have. Through all the things that people try to filter through me. And I try to take out the filter of like and dislike and say what it is really about. What is really going to make this community healthy and functioning? So sprawl verse tall, that’s not an aesthetics issue, that’s a sustainability issue based on gas. The gas it takes to drive to living 12 miles away. To being able to walk to where you work. Ummm the amount of land it takes for people who could live say in the Ellington. In the Ellington 50 people are going to have homes in a one block area.

R: ...now if those same 50 people had been denied the right to have a home on that one block area, they would probably take minimum 350 to 500 acres of land, most likely on one of the nicest slopes, where they could get a good view, these are people who are coming here, who want to ... who have money. My higher value is not in esthetics, of whether I want a building in downtown, but where does, where can I help save 500 acres of our natural resource?
C: So, there are a lot, you've just mentioned a lot of different issues surrounding the development topic, not so important those of esthetics, more important those of structure.

R: Esthetics is a community conversation that happens through umm, the myriad of umm, community conversations we have, you know people think developers are idiots ant they just come in and do whatever they want, and there are some like that...

C: Right, and I heard an opinion of that nature, I know that's one side of the story

R: Most houses everybody lives in, is built by somebody, so I don't believe house that was built...

C: well there's just concern out there, and again, I'm just gathering information, since you're kinda hearing this everyday you could shed some light on it, there's some opinions, and this is a big opinion that I hear that Asheville's growing so fast, that there's no overall plan to say...

R: that's not true

C: that's not true?

R: It's just not true, there's an overall plan, and we have no regional partnership that we can count on right now, and that's why the real focus and support of political action should be around county commissioners and legislative representation, so that they'll give us team partners to work with, so that we can create a plan. Asheville spent like a five-year process with the UDO process that help define some of the things that were instrumental in bringing in this wave of developers who go ooooh okay, yeah we'd like to build some of that stuff. But now once it's being built, people are frustrated. You know, if you look at the history of Asheville, it has gone thru cycles of development,

C: yeah

R: and it's gone thru cycles of no development and many of the features that we love and cherish about our community happened during periods of development. you know,

C: do you have a favorite example of that?

R: for me, it would be the Jackson building. It's the one with the gargoyles, the sixteen story one,

C: oh, right

R: you know, and when the Jackson building was built, everybody was, hated it, it was the tallest building in southeastern united states

C: wow
R: and it still holds the record as the tallest, smallest building. People hated it, it was appalling, and now we see it as a community icon. So here's where you get into the idea... if everybody in a point time... I have children, if I say to my children, I think I'd like to rearrange the house, Nooooooo! No, I don't want anything to change! the number of people I meet who've been here five years, two years, one year, who don't want anything to change.... you know, change is gonna happen, are we gonna be smart about change, and are we gonna try to get the best quality utilization from the developers and their money resource coming in? Or, are we just gonna say, No! as a city and just push em out in the county, and completely destroy the county? So, you know, my option is to say that I think that the city, in a world with decreasing energy supplies, um, increasing cost for energy, increasing pollutants, primarily caused by... miles traveled and coal fire nuclear power plants. If you look at those four components and you say what can somebody who sits on a city council do, what I think you can do, is encourage better and better quality, sustainable, energy-efficient buildings to be built within city districts, preferably downtowns, so that people can live, work, and play in the same place, they don't have to use their car, and as we build out from that point, we build a cohesive network that can support a transit system.

C: Now, is there a planning team to help, if we could do that...

R: there is downtown commission that works very hard to try...

C: okay, so there is a group sort of in place to help make something like that happen...

R: there's people who think about this stuff all the time and work on it, and we've funded the money for mastering planning process, and that's um getting started, and in the works, that will just enhance the focus of the downtown area, and you know...

C: okay. Do you have an example of what you would a particularly good develop... well you did, good development in Asheville, um being the Jefferson building..

R: Jackson

C: Jackson, sorry Jackson building that we now treasure

R: Well, you know, Jackson was a, it was landmark building in terms of... what I'm saying is, that's a symbol of change.

C: okay

R: in the, in the nineteen twenties, when that was made, there were a lot of wooden buildings around it, and here comes this, sixteen story, stone building people are appalled. But it fits, cities are evolving beings, you know, cities evolve, they're not static. If they're static, they die.
C: you know, that's what I've wondered about some folks that kinds say, I moved here two years ago, let's kinda, close the doors... it's just kinda funny...

R: well, and most of those people, who moved here two years ago, spent their probably somewhere else, where they um, were working really hard and didn't care, and take attention, and so now they're here, and they want to pay attention, but when they wanna do it from restricting others, I just have a little difficulty in it. You know, I moved here when there was only one coffee house downtown, uh, there were hookers and crack heads on every street, it was rough downtown. You know, and people have worked really hard to bring a vibrant community to life.

C: short period of time.

R: In a short period of time, in less than twenty years, um when we opened our business in ninety-two, we were one of the first businesses in downtown.

C: which was that?

R: it was an architectural salvage company, there was just a few business downtown that were starting to come back in .. and um, you know, I look at the growth and the things that happened in Asheville, and see that the last twenty years have been mostly positive. Do we need to curb it? Of course we need to make sure that it happens in a way that can be sustainable, but we are, what we're doing right now, when we say we wanna restrict it... we ha... we could really Disneyfy Asheville. You know, we would make it into a character of what a city is. You know, whe soemb ... I got an email from somebody the other day who said, "Charleston has no buildings over four stories." We're not Charleston. Asheville has a history of different sized buildings. Look around town.

C: I think if there's one word, for me, that describes Asheville, it's diverse.

R: umuhum. So why would you want to cul.. how do you stop diversity? I mean, I thing the Nazis tried to do it.

C: Good question. Someone described Asheville as a gem. Would you say that it is?

R: Well I moved every two years of my life. I've lived in the Alps of Italy, I lived in the East Asia, I live Germany, I've lived all over the United States and I've been in Asheville for twenty years, so what do you think I think about it?

C: wow, I'd be in Italy

R: um, I think Asheville's a gem. But I think that what people don't understand about Asheville is that the heart of Asheville, is not something easily destroyed. When I moved to Asheville, when it was vacant downtown, you know it was really hard, it was really a struggle for everybody, yeah we paid nothing for our house...
C: what was that heart of Asheville.... if it's sort of changed so much?

R: It's a spirit that lies in the land, and lies in the people who have come here. And so when people think that we can kill it... the only way we would kill it, is if we would keep, if we would close our hearts to one another. You know the spirit of the people, and the intermingling of this place, and I think the roots of the gem of Asheville go very deep, it's not just surface stuff. The surface stuff isn't what makes or breaks a city, it's how we come together as people and are creative.

C: So it's more about community?

R: It's about community, it's about, I think it's about spirit. Um, I think it's you know, it's a lot about spirit, an I think it's about a love of art, and you know, art is very dynamic, art is not static. you know, art's a moving thing. Asheville um is a it... you know, people say, "Staples ruined Asheville!" Staples didn't ruin Asheville. Okay, it didn't turn out perfectly, you know, if.... the myriad of things that happen in this city, once in a while, things aren't gonna turn out perfectly. I don't know if everything in your life has turned out perfectly... the life of a city has the same thing, you know, there's gonna be some things that work, and some thing... sometimes we go, man, that just didn't work. And look where we have this hole where, that didn't work, and that's how it got to happen. You know, people want government to be flawless. It's of the people, you know, it's run by people, it's working with people, it's people who have good days and bad days, and headaches, and miss a paperwork, or didn't see something, or made a, a decision.... I have yet to meet a single person in Asheville government who I felt had malice, or ill-will toward the city of Asheville. Do they make mistakes? Sometimes. To me staples was one of those things. Do I think it ruined Asheville? No. Do I think it's gonna last? That's gonna depend on it people shop there. And if people are downtown and don't drive their car two miles out, but would rather walk across the street and buy staples from Staples, maybe in the long run, the sign isn't the biggest issue, maybe the air quality and the accessibility of trying to put things downtown, where people can get to them, is of more value. My frustration? As someone who lived in Europe for four years? Neighborhoods who won't let there be a coffee house, or cafe in their neighborhood, or a corner store. So, everybody has to get in their car, and drive to the action, where in Europe, on every corner there's a cafe, on every corner there's a little store, on every corner, within neighborhoods.
C: yeah, love that.

R: We love that! We love that! Exactly! But what neighborhood in Asheville will allow us to put... you wanna hear another thing? Neighborhoods want to keep their neighborhood safe. So, they don't want any changing to the zoning. Well, if you do some research, the zoning from residential .... Asheville had zoning codes really early, and they were built, and you can go find them, and they were specifically built to keep the coloreds out of certain neighborhoods, so we came up with 'multi-family' and 'single family'. because guess who could afford 'single family' homes? And so we segregated people by dwelling configuration, and we act as if that's sancrisact.... sacrosanct.... whatever it is...it's just sacred, you know it's ..it's just that became a way to exclude
people from something, that now, we act like, "save our neighborhood, don’t let any residential, multi-family in here. Because once again, you know what? Poor people often use it, live in, or people who are single, or who aren’t, just you know, the nucleus family live in multi-family units. I believe more families and more people are gonna need to live in multi-family units as we move into a future that’s more sustainable. And that we may be shifting from a place where there’s any value at all in saying, “RS” for single family, and “RM” for multi-family, and just saying residential. Or what if we just said, neighborhood, which meant that then maybe you could have a store, and maybe you could have um, a coffee shop, and a hairdresser, and a baby sitter..

C: That’s kind of like the new wave I heard in development in, like wealthy place, where they’re building these sort of ‘suedo communities’… little grocery store, and post office...

R: Yeah, absolutely. Because it is the way to go… so how do we go back… and yet we’ve got intact neighborhoods now that won’t allow them, who don’t want em, who don’t anything to change...

C: and zoning could have a … change in that?

R: absolutely.

C: okay so, if we were to vote to change some zoning, then, then we could implement this.

R: Umhum, absolutely

C: I think that would be cool.

R: It would be very cool, and it would make for more integrated neighborhoods.

C: I think we’ve covered a lot of these… I don’t want to make you repeat yourself...

R: That’s alright.

C: What would you say would be some of the benefits of being a city that’s sort of pro-development minded?

R: I don’t believe we’re pro-development minded. You know, cities are like, any other thing. Sometimes, you’re sitting… okay, so say, say you’re a young lady at a dance. And you’re thirteen, and your shoes, feet are too big, and you got a little pimples, and you’re clothes aren’t nice, and everybody’s passing you by, for whatever reason. And then you blossom, a few years later, and every person, every guy at the dance in comin’ up to you… um you know, you’re job is to pick what works, and what doesn’t you know, what’s gonna be the best dance, and what’s not gonna be the best dance, and that’s the opportunity city council has to say sometimes, to say, “how can we make this the best dance we can make?” Rese… to me, right now, um, I think development can be seen as a
resource, it can create the infrastructure of our future if we can guide into the proper, into the best product. My interest happens to be, because I think that energy and climate issues are gonna turn out to be premier issues. Uh, infrastructure, energy, and climate, which will include food, I’m mostly interested in how we get people living within areas that can be taken care of, that are using the least amount of energy they can use, that are close to one another for service delivery, for safety... you know, all those aspects. Um, I think the age of America as a grand, wide open nation where you can you know spread all over the place and drive you’re big, fat car wherever you want to is, you know, coming to an end. We’ve done that, it hasn’t worked. So, what we’ve got right now is the resource opportunity to bring development into the center of city, and start bringing people to live down there. City Council can’t build buildings, you can’t build a building, the developers are the ones who build buildings. So, for two years on Council, I’ve been talking, talking, talking about energy efficiency... And I’ll tell you there hasn’t been a project that comes before me, that hasn’t had to answer that question, and be evaluated on it... Um sometimes I don’t get to go after every, you know, I don’t get it, Sometimes this over here weigh’s out, and I know this guy is gonna build these units, and I also know it’s gonna get voted on, and you know, it’s a complex thing. You can’t, you can’t you know, it’s not like you’re compromising, you’re just working toward a goal. And... and... you can’t go from here to there immediately. I can’t see how to get from here to there immediately. It can send too many mixed messages. If you turn down projects that have some sustainability ‘cause they’re not enough... well, who’s gonna bring you a project with any, you know, if you... if you brought some and you didn’t get it... why are you gonna bring any? You know, just... you have to work, you have to work with people, and you know we’re limited, we’re constrained by uh, by law and by the ordinances ourselves. I mean we have some constraints... anyway... I think that um, resource of... that... development can be a resource, it’s coming

C: to, you mean like to improve the quality of life in the city, improve it, longevity?

R: Umhum.. provide jobs for people.. other than service jobs...if we could... I’m afraid that if we clamp down, and turn it into a no... don’t change...it’s gonna, you know it's gonna be tourists, it's just gonna be a tourist's town.

C: then there's a real division...

R: Then there's just service workers, you know. Personally, I believe Asheville needs to wrap itself up to a little more urban intensity, so that it provides that more urban... more of the urban amenities that will bring those people who are the engines behind business and ideas, and economics because whether, whether or not people have already made their money and come here and retired on that, there's a lot of young families, there's a lot of people of color, there's a lot of kids in schools right now, who need some hope for jobs other than waitresses. And we can do that, if we allow Asheville to become the urban center that it is.

C: So, I'm not really.. I have an idea of an urban center, and I'm thinking of Asheville in particular.. that's uh, the park that's there... they have drum circles there....
R: Pritchard Park

C: Pritchard Park. And then they're also adding that other park in front of the courthouse area. um, would that be a part of it?

R: Oh, well the urban center of Asheville would be ... you .. from.. the whole, it's called the central business district, so from like Mission Hospital ... to um.. like Staples, to beyond.. to like the tunnel.. to the Smokey Park bridge.

C: which is commercial and residential.

R: Yeah. So it's just ... it's an urban density area, and hopefully it will expand out to the river, and build another zone down there.

C: Just even since I’ve lived in Asheville for the last eight years, down there, I’ve seen different improvement... Currier Park is a huge.. I mean, it’s affected me ... um , so that’s like an amenity that the City has now that I utilize on a weekly basis that it didn’t have before.

R: Right. So where do you think City gets its money?

C: You know, I don’t know. You could probably tell me that.

R: Property tax.

C: okay

R: So in order to have parks,

C: is that the only source?

R: uh... Pretty much. Property we get um, about a million dollars from sales tax... um, yeah our money comes from property tax. A lot revenues ..... (undistinguishable).

C: and then that’s your whole budget to do....

R: Everything. So um, So we want parks, we want greenways, if we want .... ghchduuu... we get that by having property tax. So, you and I could have our tax raised really high on our homes, or we could allow more upward development to happen. You know my house, I generate a thousand dollars a year property tax for this city. We just approved a project downtown that’s gonna be two hundred and seventy thousand dollars a year.

C: wow
R: You know, that's a lot more... and if we can do some more of those that will help. um... so we get our revenues from the General Fund, which comes from let's see... you know... (flipping through booklet). Fund Summary... any way, you're welcome to look at this if you like. This is where all the city's money comes from.

C: you know, that's a really good point you just made about where does the city get money to make certain improvements to the city...

R: We get. forty two million dollars this year will come from property tax. Charges for services, we'll get ten million, so that would be things like... um.. the fees you pay to go to the park, if we were to charge you to go to the Nature Center, or there's intergovernmental funds that come from... you know, come down from the Federal Government, we have a local options sales tax, so we do get seventeen million dollars from that.

C: So it's a bit reciprocal then, as you invest in the city and the city continues to increase in revenue, and reinvest that back into the city..

R: Uhum.

C: Cool. Okay a couple more questions, and I really appreciate all you're input, it's good. Um... how.. how does community and individual involvement and awareness affect Asheville's development? The community itself.. like you mentioned the spirit of Asheville, so the folks that have really chosen Asheville as their home, and they feel a connection to Asheville, and they think Asheville's a gem, and they wanna have a say in you know, how we go about this growth... what.. what... what are ways for them to do that? Um so they could be educated in.. you said it's complicated, you know?

R: Well, they can um, they can definitely participate in... there's boards and commissions, there's many meetings that happen all the time... there's a lot of ways... I'm always amazed at the city's outreach: And here's another thing we're workin' on, who wants to give us input on this? Who wants to give us input on this? uh, being linked into the city's web site, finding out when the... all the different ways you can interface. If you really want to get involved, you can run for council... and, and you know, I mean, you can really do that. That's what the citizens.. that's where the citizens...

C: what kind of education does somebody need to do that? Or credentials, or who do you have to be?

R: You have to be somebody who people think they want to have represent em, that's all.

C: Which is going on tonight.

R: Uhum... And hopefully... I mean, what, are you asking what kind of credentials I think you need? I think you need an open mind, I think you need to have the ability to
critique yourself, and your position, and where you stand on things. The ability to listen... not just to the ones who call you the meanest names, or yell the loudest... but those who may not be speaking up really loudly, but who drop information as you travel the many ways you go through their lives, by going to their... the meetings they’re having and those kinds of stuff... so you gotta be listening, you know. I think the person has to be uh, not after their own gain, on whatever level... you know whether it’s for financial or personal, like sense of value. Um, I personally that you shouldn’t be a career politician, ‘cause I think it colors your ability to make decisions in the moment when you realize how angry the public will get about an issue that may, you know, maybe they know, or don’t know about... that they can..... and it you’re always gauging everything on what you think people are gonna react to ... rather than what you think is the right thing within yourself

C: protecting your livelihood.

R: Yeah, you know I think that... I think that can get yourself in a big mess. Um I think you should be a perpetual student... somebody who’s willing to go and read, and study and look at the best practices and the best ideas coming out of a lot of different places, and see what people are saying.

C: that’s really important.

R: And learning to listen to other people, not just thinking you have the only idea. And I think you need to be able look ahead in the future and see what you... you know... what the future might ask for. There may be some discomfort in the present. But have an ability to like balance questions about the future with questions about the present. I think you need to have a good heart, I think you need to know who you are. I think you need to know how to self-console, comfort yourself when you’re beat up and attacked. Um, because you will be..

C: public life?

R: Yep,
C: Not for the faint of heart.