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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: ummmm 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 sign 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 sign 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 want 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 and 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 ooh 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 coarse 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, and 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

