

Spartanburg City Council member interviews: Meghan Smith, District 1

THURSDAY, MARCH 18

City Council member Meghan Smith shares her perspective on Spartanburg's challenging last year and where we go from here



Recently, we asked Spartanburg City Council members to share their thoughts about the City's experiences navigating the challenges Spartanburg has seen over the past year by participating in a Q&A blog series. Council members were asked eight questions, covering both the unprecedented year our community has faced and looking forward to how we will emerge from it and move forward. To view other City Council members' interviews, [check our main City News page here](#).

2020 was a difficult year on a number of fronts, to say the least. From your perspective as a member of City Council, what issue did you find to be the most challenging and why?

Council member Meghan Smith: Never before have we faced a global pandemic. Shifting from 'normal' life to virtual school, working from home plus the added burden on parents who had to juggle both along with wearing masks, canceling events, and not seeing loved ones continues to take a toll on all of us.

Municipalities were not designed, equipped, or resourced to tackle the challenges that COVID-19 presented. We instantly saw the limits of local government and realized that we, as a city, had very few tools in our toolbox to protect our residents and try to encourage change in their behavior. Our federal and state governments, in many ways, left to us to our own devices.

An issue that should have never been political was quickly politicized. We had two seemingly competing priorities: balance public health by encouraging people to social distance, or help our hurting businesses that relied on customers to survive. As we all suffered from pandemic fatigue, it became more challenging to find new and creative ways to keep people informed, engaged, and focused on staying diligent.

Long-term, has your view of how the City targets its resources changed as a result of dealing with the issues Council has faced over the past year? If so, how?

MS: For years the City has been deeply engaged in targeting its resources in an equitable way to address

disparities. But this past year has taught us that we still have many opportunities to improve, whether that's more meaningful engagement with communities or expanding our view of equity. One way I have seen a change in the way resources are allocated was in our approach to hospitality tax grants. I serve on the grants committee, and in the past we never considered public health and the potential for creating "super spreader" events when granting funds. That changed this past year.

Our resources must be spent equitably and in ways that keep public health at the forefront. This past year required us to spend a lot of our resources, human and capital, reacting to immediate needs, including tornado cleanup, COVID relief and recovery, and racial equity. Moving forward we have the opportunity to get back to targeting our resources at upstream strategies, eliminating barriers and proactively creating a more just system that will better support our city, residents, businesses, and families when the next crisis hits.

Despite the difficulties we've faced, the City made progress in some areas over the past 12 months. What accomplishments stand out to you?

MS: We have much to be proud of. Our community responded quickly and generously when the tornado ripped through Spartanburg in February. Our redevelopment efforts have continued throughout the pandemic; we approved the Highland Transformation Plan, secured funding for an early learning center in Highland, and after years of work now have a real plan for the residents of Norris Ridge.

We've also had more people than ever become civically engaged by applying for seats on our City boards and commissions. We have led the nation's first equity-centered comprehensive planning effort (and shifted most of that engagement online in response to the pandemic). We completed the Dr. T.K. Gregg Community Center, which will become a touchstone for the next generation. We established the Spartanburg Housing Fund that will support future affordable housing projects. We came together peacefully and decisively this summer to declare that Black Lives Matter. We have begun to face our history of systemic racism honestly and frankly by passing the first resolution in South Carolina to apologize for the City's role in systemic racism.

I am also very proud that not only have we avoided layoffs, but in fact we are ending the year giving a much-deserved raise to our police officers and other city employees. We are still working hard to improve people's lives in lots of different little ways by being a consistent stabilizing presence at a time when our residents need it most.

There are more energized and engaged citizens paying attention to the work of their city government than ever before. How does that level of engagement help the process? Has it changed your approach to your role?

MS: Not only are more people paying attention, more people are expecting a seat at the table. Residents are not just watching from afar but holding us accountable to our expressed values. Our residents bring with them talents, passions, expertise, knowledge, and solutions to the problems we are trying to solve. When they are engaged in the process, the product is more representative.

A theme I've seen emerge this past year is the cry "nothing for us, without us." I believe people have higher expectations now of their elected officials and have seen that an individual or group can make a difference in Spartanburg. That is one of the things that makes Spartanburg a unique and exciting place to live. I ran for this seat on the idea that engaged citizens are the hope of this city. A thriving and successful democracy requires an engaged citizenry expressing its goals and desires and holding the government accountable. This has informed my approach in terms of recognizing the importance of transparency and including people in conversations from the very beginning.

One area where that increase in engagement is especially noticeable is in discussion of growth and development issues and decisions. What is your general take on the current rate of growth in the city right now?

MS: We have several new projects in the works and coming online soon. It's exciting that Spartanburg is a place where people want to bring hotels, apartments, businesses or collegiate baseball teams. And we have room and opportunity for more. What we need to be sure of, and what the comprehensive plan will help guide, is that we are proactively planning for our growth in smart and equitable ways that help meet our needs for years to come.

I am proud that we are tackling market-rate and affordable housing needs alongside one another. We also have space and opportunity for infill development. The west side of town has enjoyed steady growth and still has opportunities for the future. The key is that we plan for that growth.

What steps can we take to ensure that Spartanburg's current growth is both sustainable and equitable going forward? Where are our opportunities for that growth?

MS: I am hopeful that our new Spartanburg Housing Fund will help to spur equitable growth. With this fund we will be able to incentivize and support new affordable housing projects or fill gaps that preserve or improve existing units. There is also opportunity for more meaningful engagement with surrounding neighborhoods and communities as we consider development.

It is important that at the outset that we recognize the wonderful diversity of our city, so that engagement is inclusive of all who live here. The voices of our residents deserve to be heard and included as we consider the physical future of this city. It's important that we also include improving our existing infrastructure in any discussions about growth, such as improving the West Main Street corridor, wayfinding signs downtown, sidewalks, our bus system, and roads. Everyone loves new things to do and places to eat, but growth can come with growing pains if we aren't proactive, smart, and inclusive about considering all the areas that are affected by new development.

From your perspective, what 2-3 issues are the biggest priorities for the City in 2021?

MS: We are not yet through the pandemic, and we will continue to rely on medical expertise and science in order to make the best choices in the interest of public health. Large public gatherings, for instance, will continue to be postponed for the time being while the vaccine continues to roll out. We will continue to support our businesses as they seek to rebuild their financial foundations.

We as a City are doing the same thing.

Certain financial goals of ours had to be delayed, such as our new fire facility. We will continue to focus on that financial recovery so we can resume pursuing those goals. As we seek to rebuild, we have the opportunity to recreate and reimagine our city systems in a more equitable and efficient way. If we simply try to "get back to normal" we will miss the opportunity to do things better than before. We have a rare and exciting chance to incorporate the strides we have made on equity, increased civic engagement, and housing policy and infrastructure to create a new, better normal.

From your perspective, what 2-3 issues are the biggest priorities for the City over the next five years?

MS: Over the next five years we will begin implementing many pieces of the Comprehensive Plan, our roadmap as we move forward. As will be a a document rooted in equity, my priority will be to ensure that every issue we face will be viewed through an equity lens. That will include continuing to incentivize developers to include affordable housing units in their projects, growing the housing trust fund, working

with partners to build houses across the city, supporting housing arrangements for our homeless populations, and improving existing structures so that everyone in the city has an affordable, safe, and stable place to live.

Another priority will be addressing infrastructure needs, such as the fire station, the future City Hall location, our bus system, and West Main corridor improvements. Keeping our residents engaged, informed, validated, and supported will continue to drive me as I serve the people in District 1 and the city as a whole.