

# Covington Mayoral Candidates

*Q1. Explain how, if elected, you will work to promote sustainability in AT LEAST ONE of the following areas of opportunity identified in the EPA's Planning for a Sustainable Future: A Guide for Local Governments. For more information, download the guide here.*

*Transportation*

*Land Use Planning*

*Biological Conservation and Open Space Preservation*

*Solid Waste Generation and Recycling*

*Energy, Air Quality and Climate*

*Protecting Water Quality and Ensuring Future Supply*

*Green Building*

*Green Construction*

*Green Procurement*

## **Steve Horton:**

Transportation with land use component included.

Transportation concerns are or should be of importance to the citizens of Covington, Georgia and people everywhere. Society's love affair with the automobile has literally driven (no pun intended) most people to drive everywhere they go even if the distance that must be traveled is only a few blocks. The end result it seems is traffic-traffic-every where, and it is growing. In Covington, especially during peak times such as the morning, lunchtime, and evening commutes, citizens are unable to travel for more than a couple of minutes away from their home before being caught up in a traffic grid lock of sorts. Though a lot of the current traffic problem is a result of growth and traffic from outside of Covington, it is none-the-less a problem for everyone. I, therefore, support strong growth/land use, traffic, and transportation planning efforts between the City of Covington, Newton County, other municipalities, and the Georgia Department of Transportation. With regards to traffic problems, the horse is already out of the barn so to speak, but without adequate planning and implementation of appropriate plans, it will only get worse. The old "we'll deal with it later" attitude will only deliver heartache and tears somewhere down the road. Planning may take a little time on the front end and it will cost some money, but the thoughtful and measured results it can produce may prove to be priceless. For example, from a land use perspective, planning will likely indicate that all growth does not have to occur inside of Covington in order to benefit us or the other citizens within Newton County. Ordinances, however, will be required to ensure the long term sustainability of adequate countywide land use objectives and plans. Good traffic planning will also discuss and identify bottlenecks within the street grid and potential measures such as right or left turn lanes, round-a-bouts, and other traffic control measures necessary to mitigate problems so as to effect more free-flowing traffic movement inside Covington and throughout Newton County. A "Complete Streets Approach" should be considered as well, whereby sidewalks, bike lanes, and trails or paths are maintained or added whenever streets or

## Covington Mayoral Candidates (continued)

roadways are constructed or improved. Doing so ensures healthy lifestyle choices are available and also promotes a cleaner healthier environment. Next, this multilayered planning effort must investigate the need and likelihood of implementing a public transportation component within our community that serves or can grow to serve citizens' needs throughout Newton County. Road building to handle the growing traffic may still remain a viable option as well, but the real cost effective and sustainable approach and outcome is best achieved by developing solutions that reduces or gets as many cars as possible off of the roadways. Implementation of a bus system will obviously reduce the number of vehicles on the road which will also serve to help reduce bottlenecks, associated vehicle idling, and travel delays. It will also save money for commuters, and given that many buses now run on compressed natural gas (CNG), help to produce a cleaner and safer environment. The benefits associated with time saved due to avoidance of traffic delays, fuel costs savings, and improved air quality alone should be enough to willingly compel us all to the planning table. Twice in the past, staff has presented proposals to Covington elected officials for studying and or implementing a local public transportation (Bus) system. One proposal involved only transportation benefits for commuters traveling to work locations west outside of the city. The other was for a more local, inside of Covington and Newton County approach. Both proposals were declined for one reason or another, but as I recall, the main reason was lack of collaboration with or involvement by other local governments. I further support the City of Covington converting as much of its fleet as possible to compressed natural gas (CNG) due to its, already mentioned, environmental appeal and the fact that it is a more cost effective option as well. I also support discussions with other local governments so as to encourage their use of (CNG). Given that the City of Covington is a seller/provider of (CNG), some thoughts of what, if any incentives, could be offered to promote its use should also be considered and discussed. As a further public incentive to promote a cleaner and safe environment, I support local government providing charging stations for electric vehicles located in strategically key locations. In the end, I believe that collaboration is or can be the catalyst needed to help identify and develop solutions for addressing and overcoming many worthwhile communitywide transportation and land use planning concerns. I will do my part to promote collaboration and consensus building with all local governments within our overall community as I believe doing so promotes the cost effectiveness and long term sustainability of every outcome that is produced. Thoughtful collaboration also increases the likelihood that outcomes will be for the greater good and benefit of our citizens and those people who visit us. This is our community and we need to make it work for us.

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### **Ronnie Johnston:**

Sustainability plays a role in everything we do, I believe it's important to understand the short term and long term consequences of any decision that is made that will affect our whole community. I would like to look into the issue of transportation and how it can move our community towards increased focus on sustainability. We need several forms of transportation to help us become a more inclusive town. Trails, bike lanes, bus routes, sidewalks and streets need to be planned to increase connectivity and diversity of transportation styles. The great news is that the city of Covington has had lots of plans. My only concern is that we have been slow on execution. I plan to move forward with these plans the next four years and, to be honest, it is one of the main reasons I'm running for a 3<sup>rd</sup> term. We have many people in our community that have a challenge getting to places required for their basic needs each day, this must be addressed. Looking towards environmental sustainability, I believe that if people have more options, they will not be stuck using automobiles. We have many examples of small towns that have addressed this issue and the great news if we do it right then we all win. Better community health, more environmental consciousness, and less congestion; sounds good to me.

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### **Eric Threets:**

I will work to create a growing culture of environmentally friendly solutions. We need to address issues with our industrial companies and their levels of harmful pollutants. Our focus has been placed on the immediate, perceived threat of ethyl oxide. Appropriately, we need to address these emissions reports, correct the behavior, and demand accountability of the company, B-D. However, we must also broaden our scope so that we are not taken by surprise with other industrial companies in our community. This comes with stepping back to utilize available resources while seeking other experts who are eager to assist in educating us, the community leaders, and then expanding the scope of education to the general public.

In promoting clean air I have plans to create a healthy initiative whereby our citizens would use green-friendly transportation to travel about the city. These modes of green-friendly transportation would mean encouraging the use of bicycles, electric carts, and city-owned/leased electric vehicles. This means we will have to find grants in order to produce bicycle lanes, review ordinances to promote safe roads shared by automobiles and cyclers, as well as anticipate increased traffic from electric carts. This will have a significant impact on emissions, promote healthier lifestyles, and perhaps inspire more people to exercise by walking and cycling more within the city. As my family has learned by using the 2.5-mile Eastside Trails that travel from Eastside High School, through our Wildwood Community, to Chimney Park behind the Newton County library, there are neighbors eager to meet new people. This trail is walk, cycle, and jogger friendly for so many citizens including the Eastside High School's Cross Country team in the fall. And, I personally vouch for the accessibility as well as rich exercise opportunities throughout the trail.

## Covington Mayoral Candidates (continued)

*Q2. Through its electric and/or gas utilities, your city is in the energy business. What steps should be taken to ensure that your city's reliance on utility profits avoids a conflict of interest when it comes to promoting energy efficiency and renewable energy sources in your city?*

**Steve Horton:**

First and foremost to help ensure that Covington's reliance on utility profits avoids a conflict of interest when it comes to promoting energy efficiency and renewable energy sources in the local service area, Covington needs to curb or reduce its dependency on utility revenues as a way of funding expenses associated with the government side of the budget. One method for avoiding such conflicts of interest would be for elected officials and staff to reduce its spending. It is very doable as we did so for the entire time period while coping with the effects of what can best be described as the "Big Recession". Reducing and managing spending helps to mitigate the City's desire and or need for rate increases and higher profits to cover rising costs that can create the identified conflict of interest.

Another way to accomplish similar results would be to create policies that permit what is otherwise termed "decoupling". Decoupling more-or-less allows utilities to establish policies that allow those who use energy efficiency and renewable energy source programs to make the same required profit margin. They do this through a series of individual rate adjustments when sales (not rates) go up or down due to things like growth factors or unplanned warmer or colder weather. In other words, to cover the needed revenue demand, rates move up or down marginally to ensure that the utility provider makes a necessary profit and a more-or-less flatter revenue base as a result of the allowed rate adjustments that helps the utility to keep a set profit margin. This allows end users to also realize the benefits of energy efficiency, renewable energy sources, and financial savings. The savings comes from the more consistent charging scheme that allows the utility to recover a flatter or set rate and not necessarily excess profits that may otherwise be achieved due to unexpected sales that results, for example, from an extremely hot summer and a/c units running excessively. It is during these times that the set profit component works to the customers' benefit.

Though not discussed here, other alternatives may also exist such as replacing partial or full funding of government side expenditures with city property taxes or the creation of a utility authority. They are pointed out solely because they may be considered by other persons or at another time.

Though one or more alternatives may prove effective for avoiding conflicts of interest when it comes to promoting energy efficiency and renewable energy resources, they may still prove to be hard sells to die hard utility and financial managers alike. The reason for this opposition arises as most in place, "throughput rate systems" allow local utilities to maintain the status quo and raise rates more or less at will anytime it is deemed appropriate to cover system and, in many cases, rising organizational costs. To accomplish any acceptable change, serious

## **Covington Mayoral Candidates (continued)**

education efforts and support from the top will be necessary to bring about an agreeable buy-in by all stakeholders and to create sustainability. However, I find it hard to believe that anyone can argue that reductions in spending is the right thing to do and it also allows the City to save money that can be used to fund these and other worthy or needed programs or projects. This is important as any act that promotes and allows for energy efficiency and the use of renewable energy sources, in the long run, will also allow the City to benefit from a reduction in capacity demands and the need to invest in generation facilities and it permits end users to benefit from lower costs and knowing they are doing their part to help our environment. Our environment is our home. We must protect and preserve it. If we don't, who will? The first step that I believe could be taken to avoid the discussed conflict of interest would be for the City of Covington to reduce spending where possible and "buy what it needs and need what it buys". Additionally and for now, the City of Covington could also explore the use of decoupling to determine whether or not it is a sound and viable financial practice for the City and its citizens/customers.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to this candidate questionnaire. Please let me know if you have questions.

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**Ronnie Johnston:**

As a lot of people in our community are aware, the city has been working with a committee to determine the best way to move forward with this issue of the city's reliance on a utility profit and how that can be a conflicting interest. This issue has become even more important with previous councils and administrations' decision to invest in plant Vogel. The contract put in place at that time requires the city to purchase a large amount of electricity for many decades. This electricity is projected to be very expensive and at this point we cannot get out of the contract. The good news is we have been planning for this increase and are currently working on plans to reduce the impact to our community. We are currently working on a seven-year plan to reduce our reliance on utility profits. We are looking at all the services your city government provides to make sure they are cost effective. For example, just this year we have privatized our sanitation department and renegotiated with the county on the 911 service. The savings from those two steps will be over 500,000.00 a year. This is a great step in the right direction, however we have a long way to go. We also need to grow our electric grid, by doing this we have more customers purchasing our utilities. As I move forward, I will commit to reducing the city's reliance on profit from utilities. I believe over the next 4 years we can reduce our reliance by 4 million.

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**Eric Threets:**

My number one goal, were I to be elected, is reducing the high rates of utilities in Covington. Through our interactions and inquiries, many residents have been asking why our rates are so much higher than other municipalities, even Atlanta, and what I would do to reduce them. As with the last session for City Council, some families are considering planet-friendly options such as solar paneling, being embraced by the federal government with incentives. I do not agree with members of City Council seeking to assess fees against those who choose to be globally and fiscally responsible through a 'Sun Tax'. The vote to adopt and move forward with creating a new local ordinance with tiered assessments was passed 3-2 in the City Council. There have to be other opportunities to generate revenue to offset the losses by those converting to clean energy and also in a manner not suggestive as punitive by targeting responsible families. We should be celebrating those spearheading advancement and moving toward global responsibility in Covington.

I will review the contract with Georgia Power to see when and how we can find ways to reduce our utility rates, supplement our services, and even consider partnering with other energy companies that are willing to work with a small, rural town at the fringe of Metro Atlanta with struggling families. I am also seeking clarification as I understand there is a significant increase in rates scheduled to go into effect soon.

I also seek to partner with companies that can educate our community in moving toward other green-friendly energy opportunities. Some cities are exploring the use of electric vehicles, reducing industrial as well as consumer emissions, and the time may be coming where we need to consider vehicle emissions testing to reduce pollutants in our community. Ethyl oxide is our immediate concern but we have others we need to begin to review as more reports become available.

Furthermore, citizens of Covington should not be paying higher utility rates than those in Atlanta and its suburbs, particularly since our cost of living . Covington is growing with people relocating across the country. I will formulate a volunteer panel to work with those partners and educators willing to create a sustainability plan for the next 25-30 years. It's time for a change in Covington. I have plans to bring 'Smart Growth.' I seek to unite this city as 'One Family.' And thus, we can truly say we are 'One Covington.'