

On the Record: A conversation with Albemarle's county executive
written by Newspark Team | October 1, 2019



With ongoing local elections for three Charlottesville City Council seats and three Albemarle County Board of Supervisors seats up for grabs, both the city and the county continue efforts to work collaboratively and think regionally. Over the summer, the city of Charlottesville filled its vacant city manager position with Tarron Richardson, the former city manager of DeSoto, Texas, and a Virginia Commonwealth University alumnus with government experience in Richmond. Albemarle County Executive Jeff Richardson, a North Carolina native, has been in his role since late 2017 and has previous experience as deputy city manager of Asheville and county manager of Cleveland County in North Carolina. These interviews have been edited for length and clarity.

[9/30/2019]

It's a Monday morning, and the internet is down in the Albemarle County Office Building. As we head to his office, County Executive Jeff Richardson comments on the backlog of work he'll encounter once it comes back online. He then takes a seat at a table, but the far side of his office boasts a standing desk where his laptop is connected to a larger monitor. Richardson says it's been helpful for his posture and productivity. He flips through some notes from recent meetings.

Charlotte Rene Woods: What do you hope to see happen with the county's Opportunity Zones?

Jeff Richardson: Over the past year, we have worked really hard on Project Enable, and that is our economic development strategic plan. The focus of the plan is building strategic partnerships; supporting business, so businesses can continue to grow and prosper here in our community; and also not forgetting that we need to continue to educate our community what economic development looks like in Albemarle County. It's very different than what it looks like in other counties in Virginia. We are very committed to our collaborative partnerships. The University of Virginia is a huge partner that we have. Last week, we had a very exciting announcement through the UVa Foundation for the extension of a key road infrastructure piece into the UVa Research Park, and that's a small, but poignant, example of our opportunities to support our community so that we set our businesses up for continued prosperity.

As you may know, Opportunity Zones are still a relatively new concept through the federal government. We have some key Opportunity Zones in Albemarle County that we've also paid some close attention to with the city of Charlottesville, and we are continuing to analyze those zones and continue to work with the state and with private developers and look for what I would say is that next real good opportunity for Albemarle County to take advantage of areas that have potential. They have potential to be more than what they are currently, so that we can maximize in the development areas and strengthen our tax base. When we diversify and strengthen our tax base, that gives us revenue capacity that we don't otherwise have. Then we can continue to do other things to address other things in our community that need our attention. We've had several announcements this year — the growth of WillowTree, the redevelopment of Woolen Mills, as well as some other exciting announcements. It's been an exciting year in our area of economic development.

CRW: What are your thoughts on the county's climate action plan, and how can you support it as executive?

JR: We've spent several months working to devise draft goals and strategies for our different sectors — buildings, transportation, energy sources. At the start of the process, we understood that climate impacts are primarily driven by personal sources. Our homes, our buildings, our transportation choices. I would tell you that local government has some ability to influence those sectors, so I would suggest to you that we are prioritizing a community-driven process to develop our goals and our strategies for Albemarle County's goal and plan. The reason for that is that we need the community to help drive the implementation. I'm ... excited related to that with the work and the collaboration between the university and the city. They've both been at the table and that may be as good as an example as I can ever come up with in this community for how the university, the city and the county can all partner. We can leverage our collective staff's varied experience to address this more collectively. When you look at the size of the university and the footprint that they have in our community, then you add the city and county government to include schools, you're looking at a significant employer in the region. When we begin to collectively talk about what our shared opportunities are, then we can really begin to make a difference. I think my role is to model behavior where I not just support but fully engage in the collaborative discussions with the city and the university — pushing our staffs and keeping the board appropriately connected to the conversation.

CRW: What are some areas you think the city and county are collaborating on well? I know you mentioned one just now. Tarron Richardson mentioned you two had a meeting recently as well, what came out of that discussion?

JR: The joint city and county meeting several weeks ago is the fourth time elected officials have gotten together over the past year. The very clear emphasis is to look for opportunities we have to work together. Where our biggest opportunities are, I believe, are in the boundary areas where if you're driving in and around the boundaries between the city and the county, you really can't tell what's city and what's county. We have a development area that surrounds the city of Charlottesville, and it all looks the same and you would expect for it to, and therefore, citizens would hope that there would be nice collaboration to suggest that our services are seamless.

The Regional Transit Partnership is probably as big of an opportunity as we have right now working together. It's hard to pinpoint one opportunity and one thing that we need to work on because of the vibrancy that's in our community and the diverse interest. Climate action working again with the city and the county — we have so much opportunity to make meaningful impact in this community on our sustainability efforts, and that ties directly into our regional transit partnership where we have seamless public transportation that meets people's needs. I don't know where all you have lived in your life, but if you have lived in a community where you depended on public transportation and it was highly dependable and affordable and seamless, it became a way of life for you. Just like here in Albemarle County, it's a way of life for people to get out into their private occupancy vehicle — their POV — and move around. That's what people think about. Intuitively here in Albemarle County, people don't necessarily think about public transit. We have a great partnership with JAUNT and this regional transit partnership, [Thomas Jefferson Planning District], they are a key community partner with us to continue our discussion in a really meaningful way to see where we can go collectively as a community with strengthening the public transportation opportunities. As it relates to us, as an organization, we have got to continue to be pretty intentional with our planning efforts and our public transportation planning efforts so that we are looking and being as intentional and opportunistic as we can be on looking at the development growth area and looking at it with a public transportation lens.

The city manager and I have a standing monthly meeting where we talk about a variety of city/county issues and are trying to help each other, support each other and collaborate together. When we are working with our elected officials on upcoming joint meetings between our boards we will work extra hard leading up to those meetings to make sure that the agenda that we come up with with the boards' help is impactful and has meaning not just to our boards but also gives our staff clear direction on the things they expect us to work on and we have to give project follow up on these issues.

CRW: You mentioned POVs. What would you like to see done to address congestion in the Pantops area?

Our board has prioritized our transportation leveraging program as one of our top priorities for Albemarle County government. The request provides more consistent funding to support high priority transportation projects. When we look specifically into the Pantops area, [U.S.] 250 up through Pantops as you go towards [Interstate 64], several [Virginia Department of Transportation] projects up there are very high priority. I think DOT is planning to do significant improvement to the I-64 interchange at U.S. 250 and a widening project of the I-64 interchange to city limits. Several of these projects are very high priority not just for this community, but they're in the DOT service area and they're a very high priority for this region. These projects are identified through our [Comprehensive Plan], our master plans, our regional long-range transportation plans, so it's pretty straightforward that if we are able to identify more local funding through our capital planning portion of our budget, we can be more aggressive in leveraging state dollars for some of these projects. Certainly, the Pantops area is a high priority area because we've seen significant growth there. The Pantops Master plan was just adopted. ...

CRW: Fairly recently.

JR: Yes. That has happened within the last 60 days.

CRW: What can you do to help increase affordable housing in the county, and in what ways would you work with board of supervisors, nonprofits, and developers?

JR: I think our current housing policy is about 15 years old, and we are in the process of taking the next year to build a robust policy that's informed by the data that's generated by the regional housing partnership. I think in October, we are planning on doing some community workshops and focus groups to understand people's experiences with housing firsthand. Then the work over the winter will be understanding the policy tools that are available to a county like us to help address what the issues are that come from these focus group meetings.

Affordable housing is an extremely high priority in the city, and you see that. But the county is also continuing to make significant investments in that area as well. Most recently, the board approved Southwood, which is a historic project for a community of our size. It's a project that has received national attention. It's been written about in The Washington Post. That project has really challenged our staff because of the breadth and the depth and the multi-year process of the transformation of Southwood. It's transformational.

CRW: What are your thoughts on the Crozet Master Plan?

JR: Crozet is perhaps the fastest-growing residential development area in the county. I think the master planning efforts that are underway are very timely and critical to manage the community's expectations. Anytime you have a high growth area like what's being experienced in Crozet, it brings opportunities and it brings challenges. The transformation of that community, the things being discussed and happening out there, it's a very highly engaged community. I believe at the first master planning workshop, we had about 140 people. That speaks to the level of engagement.