



## The Birmingham News

### Candidates separated by styles of leadership

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The slogans and platforms vary, but almost everybody running for the job of Birmingham's next mayor is saying the same thing: Let me lead you.

The current mayor says he has proved himself a leader and wants to keep moving Birmingham forward. The rest say they have a brighter vision for the city and a different way of taking it in that direction. And other political professionals say the leader voters choose will have an impact not just on the city, but the region as a whole.

"This is a pivotal time in the history of the city," said Natalie Davis, professor of political science at Birmingham-Southern College. "It is a time for crisis leadership. This city is in serious, serious trouble, and the next mayor's going to have to grapple with this stuff."

Davis said the race is not primarily a campaign of issues but of personalities. Most candidates identify the same issues as important - crime, economic development, education - and have some similar ideas for addressing them, but their personal approaches to tackling the problems differ, she said.

"In these kind of races, leadership always plays a part because people vote for a person, and they're deciding what kind of leader that person will be," she said.

Cities need different kinds of leaders at different times, said Otis White, president of Civic Strategies, an Atlanta-based consulting firm that specializes in urban and regional issues.

"It's sort of like a corporation," he said. "At a certain point they need an entrepreneur to get things started, or maybe a turnaround CEO to change the course the company is on. And then another time, they need someone to make the trains run on time."

Half of the 10 candidates for mayor have political track records for voters to examine.

With eight years in office, Mayor Bernard Kincaid is known as a deliberative, detail-oriented executive, and he prides himself on running a clean administration.

"There have been no kickback schemes, no investigations, no hint of scandal," he said. "We have been excellent stewards of the public's money."

Kincaid said he has proved he can get things done and wants to take the city to another level. He says business development under his administration has boosted the city's budget from \$287 million to \$326 million in five years and that the next four years will focus on neighborhood redevelopment.

"The Birmingham I envision will have a vibrant downtown and revitalized neighborhoods with new housing, modern schools, commercial activities, parks, and have a new crime-prevention policing plan," Kincaid said.

Yet critics have accused him of micromanaging his employees or delaying decisions, and some candidates have defined their leadership styles in contrast with Kincaid's.

#### **Taking action:**

"I feel that I'm the most qualified person here because I'm willing to study issues and then take action on them," City Councilwoman Valerie Abbott said at a recent mayoral forum.

Abbott praised Kincaid's honesty but said the city needs a leader who is both honest and innovative.

She, like Kincaid, is detail-driven, analyzing each word in her weekly council packet and often alerting the city clerk to typos or omissions. The difference between the two candidates, Abbott said, is that she would streamline staff at City Hall and hand day-to-day operations over to a professional city manager, freeing her to meet with developers and perform other executive duties.

"I'm one person who is very cognizant of the fact that I don't know everything," Abbott said.

City Council President Carole Smitherman jabs regularly at Kincaid, saying her philosophy is to hire the most capable people and let them do their jobs. As a onetime volunteer with high school sports teams, she's used to motivating people. And she said one of her first tasks as mayor would be to sit down and talk with the city staff to get everyone on the same page.

"I want better customer service from all of them," she said. "They do a great job now, but I want them to tap into the vision and I want to listen to them."

Smitherman, who juggles her law practice, her position as council president, her role as her own campaign manager and her involvement in her daughter's school and sports activities, says she thrives on long, hectic work days.

"If you want something done, give it to a busy person," she said.

Yet she hasn't always been able to build consensus for high-profile council initiatives, including budget battles the last two years.

#### **Taking risks:**

City Councilman William Bell said the mayor needs to take risks, as Bell says he did when he was council president. He championed the city's transfer of the Water Works assets to the independent Water Works Board. The move generated millions of dollars to build new schools, but it also became a political liability. Bell lost his council seat in 2001.

"I had to take a political hit on that," he said. "You need a mayor who is not afraid to take bold steps and take bold moves."

Since winning his seat back in 2005, Bell has positioned himself as the elder on the City Council, remaining quiet in most meetings but offering historical perspective on issues when needed.

As mayor, Bell said he'd use his connections to bring together top business leaders and form a plan to expand economic opportunities in the city. "Let them help develop a plan to implement," he said. "All they really want is to be asked."

Birmingham lawyer Patrick Cooper, making his first run for public office, said he would turn to the leaders of successful cities for help. He has already met with Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin, he said.

He said he's a fresh alternative to old politicians, touting his 20-year law career as proof of his problem-solving ability. "They've had their shot," he said.

Cooper said hiring the right team is key to government just as it is to business success. When he joined the board of Mobile-based Commonwealth National Bank, for example, it was in receivership and had only \$5 million in assets. It now has \$60 million in assets.

"Making good decisions in hiring management and making good strategy decisions in investments - these are the sort of skills I'm going to bring to the table in terms of managing the city," he said.

#### **No illusions:**

Jefferson County Commissioner Larry Langford said he has no illusions about the job, saying the new mayor will face "seemingly insurmountable problems." But he said the next leader needs the vision to suggest change and the bravery to stand up to naysayers. His "Let's Do Something" campaign slogan exemplifies his strategy.

"At this particular time in our city's history, we need someone with intimate knowledge of the community and the experience, skills and determination to do something, before it's too late, to dramatically improve the social and economic climate in Birmingham," Langford said.

Langford has a reputation as a politician with an abundance of big ideas, including a 1 cent county sales-tax increase that raised \$1 billion for school construction countywide. His campaign promises dramatic movement in his first 100 days in office, including securing funding for regional mass transit, a domed stadium and scholarships for high school graduates.

On the other hand, some of his ideas - such as trolley cars for downtown Birmingham and bringing a professional basketball team to the city - haven't panned out. And critics on and off the County Commission blame Langford for sloppy financial management that they say has forced the commission to slash previous allocations.

Langford said the county's finances remain stable. He calls criticism politically motivated.

**Handling the brand:**

The leader Birmingham chooses will matter to more than just Birmingham, said White, of Civic Strategies. That person's vision and success or failure at instilling it will define the metro area for years to come.

"Birmingham owns the brand name," White said. "List the suburbs and someone outside Alabama doesn't have the slightest idea where you're talking about, but if you mention Birmingham, everyone knows."

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