

**Tuesday, October 22, 2013**  
**6:30 - 8:00 p.m., Burnham Brook Community Center**

### **Background**

Moderators asked candidates a series of questions based upon what was heard from community members through community conversations held in partnership with the Beacon Community initiative. To allow residents to hear from both the Ward and At-Large candidates, the first half of the forum was devoted to Ward candidates and the second half of the forum was devoted to At-Large candidates.

Audience questions were submitted on note cards. Due to time constraints, not all questions were asked. Therefore, candidates were asked to answer the audience questions that weren't able to be asked during the forum. Project 20/20 offered to share the candidate's responses with attendees and 20/20 members. Some questions were directed toward specific candidates. To be fair and maintain the integrity of the process undertaken at the forum, we asked candidates to answer the questions that were directed toward all of the candidates.

Below is a list of questions asked by the audience and the candidate's response. This document will be updated as additional candidate responses are received.

### **WARDS 1 & 5**

- 1. Why is the City financial system so antiquated that one cannot call the City and pay a water and sewer bill with a credit card?**

**Mary Lou Ramon:** While you may not call as yet to pay utility bills, you may use the 'bill pay' feature on your own bank account and pay your bills from home. I do that most of the time. And I believe you can now access your water billing records on line as well.

- 2. Would you comment on the BCPD? Good or bad? What would you change?**

**Mary Lou Ramon:** There is an oath of office signed by each commissioner every year at the beginning of its physical year which states that commissioners are not supposed to interfere with interdepartmental matters. Apparently certain people don't take that oath very seriously; I do.

- 3. How do you feel about borrowing money for the City's needs?**

**Mary Lou Ramon:** The city has always borrowed money when there was a need and has a very good credit rating for always paying the money back on time.

- 4. Has the City considered creating an "Ombudsman" position to help citizens deal with City problems? Are you in favor of this position?**

**Mary Lou Ramon:** I do not think we need more layers to city government. Prior to my being elected to the commission I had no trouble navigating the system and getting things done for my neighborhood or surrounding area. I also helped make many positive changes to the city's rental ordinance and helped make our animal control contract more affordable in that we now have three shelters where previously we had only one that was costing us too much money. It didn't take being on the commission to get these things done. All it took was doing my homework and sticking with it.

## **WARDS 2 & 4**

### **1. What do you think the role of City government is for those that are hungry and homeless?**

**Lynn Ward Gray:** We are a compassionate city, the number of non-profit organizations and philanthropic interest of individuals is high. We care about our people, that's who we are, that's what we do as demonstrated by the caring shown for one another when straight line winds wreaked havoc on many areas of the city in May 2011 when a devastating storm hit the Battle Creek area. Residents went to work to help each other without hesitation. We're a city government and although we have care and concern for those who are hungry and homeless in our city, all residents expect the city to govern by focusing on primary services such as police, fire, water, and sewage and to leave some of the social issues of our city to our non-profit organizations that are making a difference. City government can therefore support from the standpoint of planning and zoning perhaps. If non-profit organizations need special use permits or other supports, I'm more than willing to review those proposals thoroughly as they arise as I have always done and make a decision based on the best interest of all citizens.

**Beverli Carpenter-Hunter:** Homelessness is something I can speak on first hand as recent as the 2011 election I was homeless living from my car with my companion Dimanpuff....during The campaign from October 2011 thru June 2012...I Also spent nearly a month at the Women's shelter...It's a rude awakening to experience yet also humbling...we are all one payday away from homelessness.....the hunger aspect was not a dilemma for me...STAYING warm for me and my Pet was...Dimanpuff past on that summer....I can't say that the City has responsibility but in an effort to serve mankind any KNOWLEDGE FIRSHAND OR SECONDHAND of any homeless person should not be swept under a rug...there are THOSE that are homeless on PURPOSE sadly....with regards to hunger....there are church's that are feeding....what could help are testimonials from the homeless that understand that it is a temporary setback.....and perhaps a warming center sponsored by the city..They do have properties ....homelessness is no joke and could befall the unsuspecting.....this is my humble opinion...

### **2. Obesity is an epidemic especially in Michigan and Calhoun County. What can City government do as a partner to help decrease obesity in Calhoun County and Battle Creek?**

**Lynn Ward Gray:** It's not only what can Battle Creek do but more so what is Battle Creek doing. We partnered with many other municipalities in the County to launch the Calhoun County Challenge a couple of years ago, this initiative has since rolled into Choose Health Calhoun County which is looking at several health challenges within our County as a whole. Since then, we have sought out collaborations where we can, like the support of urban gardening to promote fresh produce or the recent bond purchase in support of repairing approximately 10 miles of Linear Path. As a long standing member of the Health Equity Alliance's Council of

Advisors we have recently released the 2013 edition of the "Color of Health" a statistical analogy of where people of color stand in relations to the health challenges of today. We hope information will be the first step towards wellness. I look forward to continuing to partner and collaboration with other entities so that our residents can be free to live and or build a healthier happier life.

**Beverli Carpenter-Hunter:** Obesity is also something I have firsthand KNOWLEDGE of....I have diligently worked in the past year to lose weight and eat healthier to combat Diabetes Type 2. I must report as a result my numbers are decreasing.....I am not certain what role the city can play other than to create a segment at meetings to inform and have testimonials and present certificates to the overcomers ...or find incentives.

### **WARD 3**

1. **CBS is planning to air a show about Battle Creek. How would you try to impact the producers to show BC in a positive light?**

**Devon Gibson:** I would hope the producers would sit down and talk with people from town about our town before they start filming. I would push to be a part of any discussions. However, just the fact that Battle Creek is a city featured on CBS could turn into a positive for the city if it becomes a hit show. I think of the house that was used for the hit show, Breaking Bad. That house has become a tourism spot, which help out our local establishments.

**Sherry Sofia:** To convince producers of a television show to portray Battle Creek in a positive light, it would be important for everyone in the community to focus on the positive attributes of our community. I believe producers will rely less heavily on input from city officials and instead, on information and perceptions from residents, collecting information from among other sources, newspaper articles and social media websites.

2. **Given the situation in Battle Creek with our demographics, employment and tax base, how will you attain your vision of Battle Creek in the year 2020 or 2025?**

**Devon Gibson:** My vision is one in which all residents of our city have their voices heard. In order to accomplish this, I will continue to do what I have been doing for the past several years. This includes going to community events and interacting with everyday people and listening to them and then working with them and city staff to ensure their needs are being met. One of the key demographics I want to reach out to is our youth. I worked with two city commissioners and helped in recruiting members for the city's reboot of the Youth Advisory Board. I will work with this group to ensure they have a voice in the direction our city takes. When it comes to business, we have to make this city known for being more than the Cereal City. If our state learned anything in the last 20 years, it is that you cannot have your economy built around one industry.

**Sherry Sofia:** I believe Battle Creek will become more diverse and our employment and tax base situations will only improve in the next decade. Diversity will continue to create a Battle Creek where people are accepted as individuals and are free to pursue their passion.

3. **Some residences on the north side are in poor repair. I called the city about one that had cars parked on the berm and junk of all kinds in the yard. Nothing was done. What kind of options do neighbors have when this type of situation arises? The house is still in disrepair after 10 years.**

**Devon Gibson:** I've always found the best way to get something done is to circumvent the bureaucracy at city hall. By attending your Neighborhood Planning Council meeting, you can meet your local code compliance officer and talk to the person who is going to actual drive around the neighborhood and ticket violations. As a commissioner, I will be there to ensure there is follow through from code compliance. Also, on a personal level, I would attempt to engage in a conversation with the person and see why they won't clean up their property. Maybe they feel the task is too difficult and offer to help. I will often time shovel snow or rake leaves for my neighbors to find they often return the favor down the road.

**Sherry Sofia:** I cannot speak to the specifics of this particular situation. In general, the unfortunate fact is that often the city can go through the entire process and still not reach a satisfactory resolution. The court can issue an order to repair which the resident/property owner still ignores. A bench warrant can be issued for violation/disregard of said court order but unless that individual is pulled over or comes into contact with the police department, they do not actually end up in jail and the property remains in a state of poor repair.

That said, I would encourage neighbors to continue to make reports to code compliance and the police department. While it is frustrating for residents to observe little/no action or resolution to a particular situation, making sure that it stays on the city's radar is important as there is a constant demand for attention to a variety of problems.

On a personal note, I have firsthand experience with problems like these. When a former neighbor abandoned her house next door, she left inoperable vehicles with expired license plates, front and back doors wide open and a full five-gallon gas can in the front yard. It took many calls to the police department and code compliance to even get the house secured and keep the vagrants out. There have been many other properties in the neighborhood that have similar problems. Not giving up will ultimately produce results.

If this recipient would like to get in contact with me directly, I would be happy to make an inquiry of city staff as to the status and background of the specific problem.

4. **Would you vote in favor of the Mayors Against Gun Violence initiative?**

**Devon Gibson:** Yes I would. The Mayors Against Illegal Gun Violence is not an ordinance, it is basically a proclamation with no real legal standing. It will not take away the guns of those (who are the majority) that are responsible. It's safe to say we are all against illegal guns. It sends a good message.

**Sherry Sofia:** As a rule I am not supportive of non-binding resolutions that serve as a political statement to further a specific political agenda, regardless of any personal position on that issue. I would not be likely to vote for the above referenced initiative.

## **AT-LARGE**

### **1. Where do you stand regarding the Mayors Against Gun Violence contract that has been supported by many of our neighboring communities?**

**Kaytee Faris:** I believe that as a community we need to support our police force in getting illegal guns off of our streets and out of the hands of criminals. As we do not have an elected mayor, I understand why our mayor sought input on whether or not to join this coalition, however, I feel that too much of the commission's time was taken up with this matter. The letter itself was just a symbolic gesture. The time of the commission would have been better spent working on city policy.

**Andy Helmboldt:** If our mayor wants to sign it, or not, I'm fine either way with the mayor making that call. Our city and police department already do the vast majority of what is called for in the MAIG pledge. While I do have my own personal feelings and opinions about the issue of gun violence and its importance as an issue in our culture, I do not believe the commission as a body should spend time on issues like this. It is outside of the scope of our duties and responsibilities, and since there is already more than enough to keep us busy, I believe we should focus on things we have direct control over as a policy making body rather than getting wrapped up in debates about issues over which we have no real authority. If anyone would like to discuss state and federal gun violence policy with me, I'd be glad to do so on my personal time. Please contact me.

### **2. How would you make the City more fiscally responsible?**

**Kaytee Faris:** Fiscal responsibility is something in which I think our city has excelled. Through the economic turmoil of the past six years our city has done a great job at leveraging its resources. With the resignation of assistant city manager Jim Ritsema we need to make sure his replacement is someone to continue this diligence.

**Andy Helmboldt:** The city has an incredibly solid financial footing. Battle Creek government has weathered the economic crisis far better than most cities in our region, due to the responsible fiscal policies and practices of its staff and leadership. They should be commended, and there is very little room to second guess the decision making behind our current fiscal position.

### **3. What are your top three priorities for the City of Battle Creek?**

**Kaytee Faris:** Firstly, improve communication between the city and residents by engaging in real conversation, utilizing technology and building better relationships.

Second, we must create a nurturing environment for small businesses and entrepreneurs. We need to streamline our codes to make the process of building a business here both more intuitive and logical. We need to talk to small business owners to see how the city can better meet their needs and be a true partner to business owners not an adversary.

Third, attract and retain young professionals and young families by creating safer neighborhoods and a more vibrant, inspiring community

**Andy Helmboldt:** In order to build a more prosperous future for our younger generations, we need 1) Our city government to become more “by the people” by actively inviting more participation from a wider cross section of our community. 2) To make a more concerted effort as a community to support small businesses and entrepreneurship. 3) A transportation system that gets people where they need to go.

**4. When there are just 15-20 people at any NPC meeting, do you allow them to speak for thousands who don't participate? Do they count, and how would you reach them?**

**Kaytee Faris:** Everyone counts! I think it's time that we really looked at why people are not participating. I personally hope to reach these folks by making myself available. I am and will continue to be present in the community, at events, through volunteering, etc. I'm glad to converse in person, on the phone, via email with all residents. I'm running to be a public servant. The point has been made in this election that residents lack trust in the commission. I think this trust is earned and that step one to earning it is having a commission that trusts its residents. We need to listen to every voice in the community.

**Andy Helmboldt:** The few dedicated folks who engage in NPC's do not speak for all the residents of a neighborhood. That is not what they are structured to do. NPC's currently fill a valuable advisory role to the commission and city staff, and many NPC members are long-time residents with a wealth of knowledge and expertise to share about the neighborhoods they call home. While anyone is welcome to join, NPC membership is voted on by the other current members, not the neighborhood public at large, and as such those members are not voted-upon representatives of the entire neighborhood. Those thousands of people who do not participate in NPC's absolutely do count. I take part in a variety of activities, meetings and events throughout all our neighborhoods to make sure I'm getting the widest possible view of our community. And during campaign season, I knock on literally thousands of doors and talk to hundreds of people about how they view Battle Creek. And even that only barely scratches the surface of the 52,000 people who live here. It is our job as commissioner to be experts about the people who live here, so that we can make decisions that have their best interest at heart.

Any questions regarding the forum should be directed to Amanda Lanker at 269.830.1936 or 269.209.0700.