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By:

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East Lansing voters will have only three choices for two City Council seats open this November. In the last City Council election, six people ran for three seats. Why have people decided to run and *not* run for East Lansing City Council this year?

We asked several local folks who have been professional Council-campaign-watchers, two people who considered running but opted against it this year, the three people running ^[2], and Scott Hirko, who said he was going to run but didn't ultimately file. Susan Woods, who is running for Council, did not respond, nor did Hirko [see update below], but most people we asked did. Notable themes emerge, particularly the intensity and difficulty of being on East Lansing's City Council right now.

Aaron Stephens, who is running for Council, responded, "I am a political organizer by trade, and after working this past election cycle first on behalf of Bernie Sanders, then for Hillary Clinton, I believe now is the most important time to stay involved, especially on the local level. People feel like their voices aren't being heard, and everyone deserves to be represented by someone who is

accessible, and accountable. I love this City, and if elected, I intend to be that representative.?

Ruth Beier, who is running for re-election to Council, told ELi, ?I had specific goals when I first decided to run for Council. I wanted to increase transparency, improve our financial situation, get rid of blighted buildings, and make sure that all new developments paid for themselves. I have made progress toward all of these goals, but I am running again because there is still work to be done in each area.?

When asked if, as a Council member, she has a sense of why some qualified people might opt *not* to run, Beier answered, ?Yes. This is not a pleasant job. It is vital, but it is not pleasant.?

Mark Grebner, a longtime Democratic County Commissioner and a political consultant, told us, ?I have always thought the East Lansing City Council is way too demanding, and way underpaid. As a result, the only people who run are willing to make a serious sacrifice on behalf of issues they care about. It's not that RUNNING is so hard?it's what happens if you have the misfortune to be elected. By comparison, the county commission looks like a very cushy deal.?

In East Lansing, being on Council currently pays \$8,272 per year, and being on Council plus being elected Mayor by your Council peers means you're paid \$9,634 (total) per year.

Adds Grebner, ?East Lansing has so many people who are passionately involved in so many local issues that being on the City Council is almost all-consuming. Now, I suppose, the budget problems are looming, and they'll be even less fun than dealing with the downtown developments have been. Personally, if a vacancy occurred, and I were offered the appointment, I wouldn't accept it?it's just too much work.?

City Clerk Marie Wicks also points to the huge amount of work: ?What I can say, having been close to the City council/agenda process for my entire nearly twelve years with the City, is that serving on council entails a tremendous time commitment in terms of meetings, serving as liaisons to other boards and commissions, and simply ?doing the homework? in preparation for making extremely complicated policy decisions.?

The two people we knew had considered running but ultimately didn't gave us some additional insight. We are not using these individuals' names; we offered them the opportunity to speak on the record but anonymously, because they may run in the future and because both are busy serving in other volunteer capacities in local government, and they do not wish to appear to be criticizing any Council members or the electorate.

I put to one the question of whether it is the time commitment. He responded, ?I am somewhat concerned about the time commitment since I am currently involved in a number of non-profit activities in addition to managing our company. In order to give the Council responsibility the time it deserves, I would need to reduce these other commitments.?

He added, ?However, for me, the larger issue is my desire to better understand how the City works, most specifically in matters of finances. My efforts with the various commissions and committees has helped a great deal, but it seems the more I learn, the more I realize I need to learn.? He said he was working to learn more by watching Council much more carefully in advance of a possible run for office (something Erik Altmann did before he decided to run for

Council).

The other person we spoke to who considered running but didn't this time had this to say: "Obviously, the concerns of citizens should be important to a City Council, but this particular Council seems to think there's a way to make everyone happy in small instances, like parking, where there is never going to be one solution that works for everyone. But then they seem to be curiously deaf towards public comment when it comes to businesses and development. I think it's making people frustrated to see the time spent on things that seem relatively minor and then watch huge developments get rubber-stamped in the face of vocal opposition."

She also said that she looked at the emerging slate of candidates and felt she could support two.

She adds, "on the selfish side, whoever is on the Council for the next two years is going to be in the uncomfortable position of slashing a lot of personnel out of the budget. I don't want to be the person who tells the citizens of East Lansing that they are going to have to wait an extra five minutes for an ambulance call, or who tells the Police Chief that six officers have to go because we don't have enough retirees leaving the force."

This person went on about City finances: "There is this feeling among East Lansing residents that we are in this mess because the "The City" (meaning an amalgamation of all the City Councils since the beginning of time) has somehow mismanaged City finances. I definitely don't disagree that there have been some big mistakes made, like the purchasing of the Evergreen houses [3], or pursuing Avondale Square [4] after the federal grant fell through. But, generally speaking, I feel like the City has been reasonably well run and our problems come from pretty identifiable sources, primarily unfunded pension liability which is closely tied to the financial crash."

Now, she says, our City Council faces a "kind of a chicken and egg paradox. The Council will not be able to institute policies to help with City finances until it regains the trust of the citizens, and citizens won't trust the Council until they can unravel the financial mess. It's going to mean that being a City Council person in East Lansing will be a pretty thankless task for the next ten years or so...maybe thirty years, since that's when the Center City TIF expires."

So, all in all, it looks like a major reason some people who could be viable candidates are deciding not to run is that they understand what a big job Council faces in terms of: the City's finances; an informed, highly educated, and vocal electorate; and continued big decisions in terms of real estate development. Additionally, they understand how much work it takes if one takes the job seriously, and how little one may be rewarded.

Update: *Scott Hirko got back to us after this article was published and provided this statement as to why he did not file to run: "#1 - I traveled in June to mid-July to Martinique. I was assaulted at knife point and almost killed. I lost my passport, phone, among other things - it was a challenge just to return. I did not return until July 20. Made me rethink about my life at this point. #2 - I want to spend more time with my youngest daughter who is entering EL High School as a freshman this year. #3 - As a professor teaching at CMU, my time is limited due to travel to/from Mt. Pleasant; I picked up an extra class this fall (Tuesdays & Thursdays) which would make it a challenge at timing to return for meetings - not to mention the extra work load. #4 - I need to focus on my research and university service as I am nearing a tenure decision on my*

employment status. #5 - I am also a consultant to the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, and there may likely be a significant project that may require more of my attention. #6 - I have some health issues that I want to address at this time." He added, "I may think about running the next time around, but right now timing is poor for me. I will try to influence decision-making in other ways."

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