

Local Politics Heats Up – Central-Wisconsin Edition

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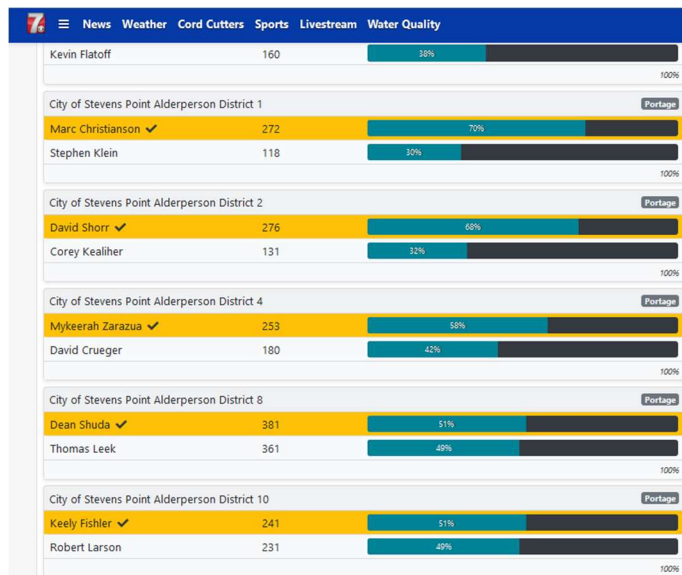
There’s nothing like an attempt by political opponents to flip control of the city council to concentrate the minds of local legislators. With local politics becoming more fractious all across the country, this was the peril that faced several other Stevens Point council members and me in the April 5 Wisconsin spring election.

After stoking bitter opposition to the council-approved plan for an eight-figure project to reconstruct the Business 51 artery through town, our critics fielded a slate of five candidates to challenge all the incumbents up for reelection. An electoral sweep would have given them a majority of the eleven-member body, which they could’ve built on next year by mounting challenges in the odd-numbered district seats. *Spoiler alert: four of the incumbents were reelected, with the fifth falling short by just twenty votes (a 2.7% margin).*

The current smart growth-oriented council majority was in the 2015-2017 elections and subsequently maintained by newer like-minded council

members. In the years since, we’ve worked to [redevelop our downtown and transform a commercial strip \(North Division St.\) for mixed-use](#) in order to grow our community’s tax base and overall economic vitality.

The controversy surrounding Business 51 has raised the community’s political temperature to fever levels. As our opponents have distorted the plans for Church Street at the southern end of the project, it’s made local politics extremely messy. It is true the number of lanes for vehicles will shrink from four to three (with a turning lane), a move opposed by many business owners along Church St. But despite what critics of the city council say, this road diet didn’t spring from our bike- / pedestrian-friendly agenda. That’s because we largely met those objectives with buffered bike lanes just one block to the west, and Church Street’s commercial strip development pattern is well entrenched. The rationale for the plan is pure fiscal prudence. Fewer lanes avoids the expense of



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overbuilding and fits the criteria for federal funding we desperately need—a point proved by the \$3.5M grant that came through just days before the election.

Meanwhile at the other end of Business 51 is North Division Street, a commercial strip along the western edge of the University of Wisconsin - Stevens Point campus with the potential to be a thriving walkable second downtown. Mixed-use development on this stretch is not only a priority for us as a council, its success is a proud and important piece of our record.

REFERENDUM ELECTIONS AND CHOICE ELECTIONS

This council takes our responsibilities seriously and has resolved some of the community’s longest-lingering issues. At the same time, we generally do a lousy job of touting our successes or cultivating our public image. Our role is strictly part-time with a salary of \$5,300. For all the time we devote to meetings, learning the background on the items on our agenda, and following up on constituent concerns, we don’t do a lot of



New convent apartment project breaks ground in Stevens Point



ribbon-cuttings or media work (something we’ve recently tried doing better, as indicated in the picture to the left). So while each of us has strong personal networks in our districts, we hadn’t really laid out the case for ourselves ahead of the election season.

Political strategists have two fundamental categories for how to approach campaigns: ‘referendum elections’ and ‘choice elections.’ In the former, voters render their verdict on how things are going overall. Incumbents have either a) earned two more years or b) deserved to be bounced out of office. A choice election focuses instead on highlighting contrasts between candidates’ positions on issues, political leanings, or qualifications. And you could see the two different approaches at work in our election.

By and large, the slate of challengers tried to push their critique of the city council as facing voters with a choice. Running a standard populists play, the council’s critics accused us of pursuing hare-brained schemes rather than the wishes of community members. And from my perspective as a career-long policy advocacy professional, I must give our opponents full credit for making the issue of Church Street so prominent. For six months leading up to the election, they were a forceful presence at council

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meetings. Because of the council’s longstanding practice of giving the public maximum opportunity for public input, they had ample chance to be heard (contrary to their knock against alderpersons for supposedly refusing to listen). Our opponents also exploited this openness by being the first within memory to regularly applaud each other in council meetings—at times turning our sessions into mini opposition candidate campaign rallies. And we were repeatedly warned we’d better heed the (self-appointed) voices of “the people” or be voted out of office.

When it comes to Church Street, our council did the right thing in approving the plan recommended to us by the City’s public works department and our outside engineering consultant. But in the bigger picture, that was just one tough decision we made. If the campaign focused narrowly on that issue, it wouldn’t do justice to our record of successes. Which is why a referendum election framework with a wider-angle lens was more logical for the incumbents. Because despite what our critics say, we’ve served our community well and have a lot to show for our efforts.

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THE INCUMBENTS’ RECORD

Right after I was first elected, I had a stand-up meeting with a then-alderperson colleague on a street corner of North Division. “Take a look around,” he said “the only word to describe this is *blight*.” It was an exaggeration, but made an important point. The undeveloped lots and mere smattering of new buildings were at odds with Division Street’s potential to be a second downtown with a mix of residential and commercial buildings.

Six years later, a transformation is underway. Exciting projects are being built one after another, just the way any smart growth proponent might predict. And, crucially, the projects add up to a broadened tax base. In Stevens Point the sum total has been \$214 million in net new construction over the past four years.

And because city government plays a key role in encouraging and supporting projects, the five council incumbents touted these successes during the campaign. This municipality has a strong-council form of government. Except for oversight of emergency services and appointing the police and fire chiefs, the Common Council (as it’s called in Wisconsin) gets the final say on all matters. Fundamentally our job is to make decisions.

In fact, council action was needed to keep a pair of lynchpin projects—one on Division, the other downtown—from being derailed by the pandemic. When COVID hit, the developers couldn’t build the projects on the terms that had been agreed. So the choice we faced was whether to let the projects fizzle out or make adjustments to the agreements, for instance to rejigger the project phases. (It’s worth noting that one of the

projects is being built on a site that had sat empty for a decade.) By working with the developers to stay on-track, we preserved the momentum of growth in our community, including the series of projects on Division St that followed it. Meanwhile all five of us candidates have heard from local business owners who see the development helping their bottom lines.

And that was just a part of our pandemic response. When COVID first hit, we offered emergency grants to help small businesses make rent, mortgage, or utility payments. We eased deadlines for people to make tax payments. And we made it easier for local tavern owners to serve their customers outside and protect their health.

RUNNING AND WINNING ON OUR RECORD

Our opponents' robust advocacy ensured that Church Street would be an issue in the election. The election's outcome would hinge on whether voters agreed with their demand for four lanes and whether this topic would overshadow all other issues. For six months the council's critics claimed that "the people" were angry at our support for the (cheaper) three-lane alternative and promised it would doom our reelection. Yet our conversations with constituents lined up with our success at the ballot box. While the critique of the council did resonate with some voters, a clear majority appreciated our work and the results it has produced.

Looking at the five races, the median and mean were nearly identical. Alderperson Mykeerah Zarazua had the median result: winning by a 16 per cent margin. Combining all the votes together, the incumbents garnered 15 per cent more than the challengers. Interestingly, all three challengers who leaned into the Church Street issue were defeated. The one successful challenger, very well known in the community from his family's funeral home business, pushed the general idea of an unresponsive council without getting into the road diet debate very deeply.

The incumbents' victories also square with the findings of political science. At the same time that I was running, I was reading [J. Eric Oliver's *Local Elections and the Politics of Small-Scale Democracy*](#). In his book, Oliver distinguishes between local 'managerial' elections and national 'existential' elections:

Much like a corporate board evaluating a business management team, voters in managerial elections will evaluate local leaders on how good a job they are doing relative to the specific mandates of their institutions and the particular histories of their communities.

With the election behind us, now we get back to governing. To cite a line that was a staple of my campaign: "My colleagues and I make the best decisions we can for our community and its future, often involving tough choices."