

Huntersville mayor leads with conversation

Jill Swain became first Mecklenburg town mayor to receive LGBT group's endorsement

by Matt Comer :: matt@goqnotes.com

HUNTERSVILLE — For 14 years, Jill Swain has committed her professional life to serving the citizens and residents of Huntersville, a town of about 50,000 people just a dozen miles north of Uptown Charlotte.

But, don't dare call Huntersville a "suburb." If so, one might get a gentle pushback from Swain.

"I don't see Huntersville as a suburb," she smilingly responded when this writer used the word to describe her community. "I see it as its own entity."

And, that's a view her peers share. "I don't think we see ourselves as suburbs at all," she said. "We are our own job creators, we are self-sustainable. We are connected with the school district, connected in the county. For all intents and purposes, we run our own show."

But, relationships, too, are important and throughout her service (she was first elected as mayor in 2006 after serving four terms on the Huntersville Town board) Swain has witnessed regional partnerships change and grow.

"I think in the years I've been in service I see that our relationship with Charlotte has changed," she said. "We were an outlier for many years and now we are a regional partner. And, we have to be a regional partner."

Swain says her residents and those in Charlotte are connected by rail line and local highways. Her residents and corporate executives use Charlotte Douglas International Airport. And, as city borders and population have grown, neighbors in the two cities are living, working and learning closer together today than they ever have in the past.

That increased regional partnership and exchange is an important dynamic for groups like the Mecklenburg LGBT Political Action Committee (MeckPAC), which sought this year to reach out to elected leaders in Mecklenburg County's towns and expand their advocacy for LGBT equality to all the citizens and residents across the county they represent.

For the first time, MeckPAC sent questionnaires to the mayoral candidates in towns like Huntersville, Mint Hill, Matthews and Davidson.

Swain, who was re-elected in November to her fourth term as mayor, was the only candidate to respond to MeckPAC's request and the first Mecklenburg county town mayoral candidate to receive a MeckPAC endorsement.

Swain said she happily returned MeckPAC's questionnaire.

"Why wouldn't I," she asked. "I am finding more and more that there are so many riches out there in just meeting new people and sharing new viewpoints. Why as a mayor would I not meet with an organization that could have valuable input on some of the decisions that we make? To me, it's sort of a no-brainer."



Huntersville, Swain said, is just like any community. "You're always going to have some people who just don't have open hearts, but I think we do have a very open community. I think every community probably has a ways to go and I would say that's us, too."

Huntersville currently does not include sexual orientation or gender identity in its non-discrimination policy for town workers; neither do any of the other Mecklenburg towns. That's one of the items MeckPAC wants to see changed and an advocacy initiative they've already successfully achieved at the Charlotte City Council and Mecklenburg County Commission.

MeckPAC's mission might perhaps be assisted by Huntersville's past, affirming policy-making. A dozen years ago, soon after Swain was elected to the town board, she and her colleagues defeated a proposal that would have barred gay and lesbian families from receiving family memberships at the Huntersville Family Fitness and Aquatics center.

"There was a lesbian couple who had a number of kids they'd adopted and for their health and well-being, needed a family membership," Swain recounted. "We had people on the board who said no."

Their proposal didn't pass, but Swain doesn't describe that as a progress.

"No, I would not say we were welcoming at that point," she said. "The very fact that we had that debate, to me, was a step back."

Still, the debate did open up much-needed conversation.

"I think a lot of our community members have been much more embracing because they see, here are couples who are adopting kids that straight parents would adopt," Swain said.

Swain is looking forward to her fourth term as Huntersville's mayor. She has a variety of goals, including economic development and a focus on local schools. She also serves as a member of the

Metropolitan Transit Commission and said transportation will be a continued priority as the region anticipates the extension of the light rail system and Interstate 77's managed high occupancy toll lanes.

Through all of it, Swain said she'll continue to lead with openness and conversation.

"I think our world is a better place if we open up our hearts," she said.

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— Mayor Jill Swain

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Swain added, "If we pull all this together, I see that it is really important in my role to get people to open up their minds and understand that this really is the right time in my lifetime and hopefully in others that we teach each other to be understanding. We have an opportunity to expand our knowledge and become better people just for becoming more open." ::

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Meetings: Third Tuesday of every month, except when there is specialized programming, plus monthly socials to promote networking and friendship

Program: A wide variety of topics of interest to appeal to the diverse LGBT community

Time: After work with a cash bar social and heavy hors d'oeuvres with dinner and program following

Membership Information: Visit the website for application options and benefits. Call 704-565-5075 or email businessguild@yahoo.com for more details or write to The Charlotte Business Guild P.O. Box 33371 | Charlotte, NC 28233

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