

Pleas from a politics junkie



RYAN TUCK
DTH EDITOR IN CHIEF

I am what you would call a municipal junkie. For the first three years of my college career I spent many a weeknight inside town halls and chambers, listening to budget requests and about the need for leaf-blower regulations and landfill space.

And a big part of my job for The Daily Tar Heel for the past few years has been to inform a generally uninterested readership of why I spent so many nights listening to presentation, after presentation, after presentation.

In many respects, I've failed at that job. I still run into more people who don't know where Town Hall is than people who have visited the small building off Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard.

That's because municipal politics for many is a distant entity that we know operates for us but about which we care very little. Most people couldn't name their local, elected politicians until a Wal-Mart is going up down the road and they're screaming at one.

For students, the problem is worse. Whether they don't care about local politics because "Chapel Hill isn't my home" or because they believe that Chapel Hill ends at McCorkle Place, I don't know. But the fact that only 329 student-aged voters participated in the 2003 elections indicates that interest in municipal politics is passing at best.

So this is my plea, my last request of you students: put down the remote and get out to one of the bevy of candidate forums over the next month. Go to a Town Council or Board of Aldermen meeting. Patronize a restaurant or business not on Franklin Street.

In short, get to know this town. To go through four years at UNC and not get acquainted with any of the area's lovely little towns is truly unfortunate.

It sounds trite, you've heard it before, but try to hear me now: Municipalities affect your lives in ways that you may not even realize.

Last year, during the Town Council's citizen budget advisory committee deliberations, there was a proposal afoot to equalize the Dumpster pickup fees among businesses and residences. The change would have upped the price sororities and fraternities have to pay for pickup and surely would have altered residency fees.

Still don't care? When the megalith that is Carolina North finally breaks ground, it will be in large part molded by the way the area towns want it to look. This year's slate of candidates, if elected, could affect the very personality of our University's growth.

And please don't forget Carrboro. Do you like the small-scale, idyllic feel of Chapel Hill's neighbor? That's an alderman priority, one that could change with a shake-up in membership.

These local governments have a lot of power over things we all care about, and the only way to check our elected officials is to show them we give a damn.

Sure, voting is one way, but it'd be nice if there were more students consistently at town meetings than me and DTH reporters.

It'd be nice if more than 5 percent of our eligible voter class here on campus bothered to roll out to the polls this November.

When mobilized, this campus is an unquestioned political tool, as Alderman Mark Chilton discovered. When Chilton was elected to the council in 1991 as a senior, he depended on heavy on- and off-campus support.

A mere 4,618 votes won the 2003 elections. If this year's freshman class rallied behind one candidate, it could almost provide that number of votes.

So, for future generations of students, for the opportunities missed by our predecessors and for yourself, mark Nov. 8 on the calendar.

Let's craft a new image for ourselves.

Contact Ryan Tuck at rtuck@email.unc.edu.

GETTING IN THE GAME

Students make up a powerful coalition — if they vote

BY MEGHAN DAVIS
SPECIAL TO VIEWPOINTS

Elections break down into a game of numbers.

You analyze every vote, sort them into categories by demographic.

Strange, then, that Chapel Hill's largest voting bloc might never pay property taxes or even wander much farther than Franklin Street.

University students constitute more than half of Chapel Hill's population — some 27,000 of them in a town of 51,000.

But only 329 people aged 18 to 22 actually cast a ballot for the last local elections in 2003.

It begs the questions: How do you make students care? How do you register them to vote? How do you make sure they cast an educated ballot? How do you get them to run for office?

The answers don't come easy.

But campus groups are addressing low turnout in every way they can invent, from simple encouragement to setting up candidate Pit-sits.

Among those groups is VoteCarolina, a nonpartisan organization dedicated to encouraging student turnout.

"Registering voters is one of the most important things we can do, that anyone can do," said Jeremy Spivey, the group's president. "I think if we can register 50 percent as many voters as last year and get 50 percent as many to the polls, we can swing the election."

VoteCarolina plans to request funding from Student Congress to publish a voting guide in conjunction with The Daily Tar Heel. It also wants to get student groups to perform in front of Morehead Planetarium during early voting, and it's getting as many Franklin Street businesses as it can to offer discounts to people with "I Voted" stickers.

The idea is to make students think voting is fun — cool, even. Think the celebrity "Vote or Die" campaign, with the promise of cheap ice cream from Ben & Jerry's as an added bonus.

Of course, it also helps if students

actually know what they're voting for.

Chapel Hill Town Council member Mark Kleinschmidt, who is up for re-election this year, said he thinks information is readily available to students.

"There's student organizations on campus who make it their mission to help students know the issues in elections," he said. "There are three great newspapers in this area, the three of which do an excellent job of covering what's going on."

And for people who don't want to pick up the newspaper for anything but the crossword, campus groups are bringing the candidates to their constituents.

Students for a Progressive Chapel Hill is endorsing candidates Jason Baker, Laurin Easthom, Will Raymond and incumbent Mark Kleinschmidt for Town Council. It's also doing everything in its power to see that they win — with candidate events at the center of its plans.

"The way to get students to vote is to get them to care who wins," said Chairman Tom Jensen, a UNC senior.

"We looked for candidates with a record of service to the town and a record of progressivism. Most Carolina students describe themselves as progressive, and that's what we emphasized to candidates."

Several of the candidates the group endorsed have agreed to come sit in the Pit for a couple of hours every week until the election, Jensen said.

"It's a chance for candidates to come and actually interact with students in a way that hasn't happened before," he said.

Two of the candidates, though, have been interacting with students for quite a while. Baker, a UNC junior, and recent graduate Walker Rutherford — former head of the Interfraternity Council and the campus Board of Elections — might make students take more of an interest in this year's race.

"It will help for two different reasons — it gives students a direct voice in town, and they're people who understand what it means to be a student now," Spivey said.

Another unique aspect of this year's race is the way the Internet has changed

municipal politics.

"I think regardless of how much time you have available, there's lots of different ways to interface with local government," Kleinschmidt said.

He mentioned OrangePolitics.org, a local news blog that often features posts from town officials like — well, like Kleinschmidt and other candidates.

"It's not just reading what people say," Kleinschmidt said. "It's a place where you can ask people who are involved questions."

Tapping into that resource could be vital for students, who are just as likely to get their news from the Internet or "The Daily Show" as the newspaper.

Jensen said his group's approach to encouraging students to vote involves bringing information straight to their computers. Students for a Progressive Chapel Hill has created listservs for students that are organized by voting precinct in an effort to clear up some of the confusion students often feel on Election Day, when they try to figure out where to vote.

"It integrates grassroots campaigning with modern technology," Jensen said.

Ultimately, though, the best way to get students to vote is to make the election, at least in some ways, about students.

Spivey said improving lighting around off-campus fraternity and sorority houses, providing recycling bins on Franklin Street and replacing empty storefronts are major student issues.

Jensen said he thinks town issues can be simplified into national issues.

"Students are worried about clean air and affordable housing, more so than improving connector roads," he said.

And candidates should care enough to reach out to students, he added.

"If someone wants to be on Town Council, they should care about all parts of the community," Jensen said. "We're a constituency that can be mobilized about issues."

Contact Meghan Davis at mcdavis@email.unc.edu.

A look inside student success

GERRY COHEN
FORMER TOWN COUNCIL MEMBER

Running for Chapel Hill town office as a student is not easy.

Only two students have succeeded in winning since the voting age was lowered to 18 in 1971 — me in 1973 and Mark Chilton in 1991. Much of it was being in the right place at the right time.

There have been three high-water marks in student voter registration in southern Orange County: the 1972 presidential election, the 1990 Harvey Gantt-Jesse Helms Senate race and the 2004 presidential race. In all three, about 7,500 students registered to vote in Chapel Hill, and students were elected to the Chapel Hill Town Council the year after the first two elections.

Will this confluence affect this year's Town Council election, in which UNC student Jason Baker is running?

Arriving in Chapel Hill from Connecticut in fall 1968, fresh from being a volunteer for Eugene McCarthy at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago (I can still smell the tear gas), I went to a freshman orientation debate between political science professors Alden Lind and Lou Lipsitz about whether electoral politics was the best way to change things.

I decided it was.

Student involvement in Chapel Hill politics then was minimal. The voting age was 21, and the board of elections did not encourage student voting.

In the May 1971 Chapel Hill mayoral election, there were just two dormitory residents registered to vote in Chapel Hill. But in July, the voting age was lowered, and I decided to get involved in registering voters.

Voter registration itself was difficult. There was no mail-in voter registration like now, and voter registration in Chapel Hill took place just one day a week at the Municipal Building. A group of us lobbied the Orange County Board of Elections to register voters at Woollen Gym before the voter registration deadline in 1972, at the time a major triumph.

Orange County wound up giving McGovern a large chunk of his support in North Carolina. Meanwhile, I started law school in fall 1972 and had decided by that point to run for town office, largely on the issue of public transportation. Chapel Hill had no bus system at the time, but Mayor Howard Lee was pushing strongly for one. Referenda on the subject had failed in Chapel Hill and Carrboro in 1971.

I applied unsuccessfully for a vacancy on the Town Council in 1972. Then I sought a county commissioner vacancy in 1973 but finished second in the Democratic Executive Committee balloting. I was also well known on campus, as I wrote a weekly political column for The Daily Tar Heel.

Orange County McGovern coordinator Charlie Dean, brother of former presidential candidate Howard Dean, gave me a box with file cards of all of Chapel Hill's McGovern volunteers and contributors, giving me a huge head start.

In March 1973, I sat in a room in Lewis Residence Hall with three volunteers and put together my first campaign mailing, and spent much of that fall doing door-to-door campaigning and attending candidate forums.

The issue of establishing a town bus system, coupled with the high residual base of student voter registration from the year before and my active involvement in local politics for two years, were major factors in boosting student turnout. In 1974, there was a successful referendum on establishing a bus system, which started operation soon after.

I was re-elected in 1977 but resigned two years later. Mark Chilton, elected as an undergraduate in 1991, was re-elected in 1995. Chilton is now running for mayor of Carrboro.

Will students vote heavily in this November's town elections? History might point that way, but that might largely depend on the kind of campaign Jason Baker runs and what kind of issues emerge.

Contact Gerry Cohen, director of bill drafting at the N.C. General Assembly, at gcohen@nc.rr.com.

THE FACES OF LOCAL POLITICS

CARRBORO MAYOR



Mark Chilton first was elected to local office in 1991 when he was a student at the University.



Alex Zaffron has served as a member of the Board of Aldermen in Carrboro for 10 years.

CARRBORO BOARD OF ALDERMEN



Catherine DeVine, who had a hand in town politics, has served on two town committees.



Jacquie Gist, an incumbent, has been an alderman for four terms — a total of 16 years.



Randee Haven-O'Donnell is a former member of the town's Planning Board.

CHAPEL HILL MAYOR



John Herrera, an incumbent, spent much of his first term on the board serving Latinos in the town.



David Marshall, a veteran of the U.S. Army, is a newcomer to Carrboro politics.



Katrina Ryan, also new to politics, says one of her key issues is Carrboro's annexation policy.

CHAPEL HILL TOWN COUNCIL



Kevin Foy, the incumbent, decided earlier this year to seek his third term at the helm of the town.



Kevin Wolff only recently moved to the area; he says a mayoral run will help him learn the ropes.



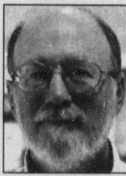
Jason Baker, a political science major, is the only current student seeking a spot on the council.



Robin Cutson, a long-time resident, says the council often has its priorities skewed.



Laurin Easthom, an active resident in local affairs, is a Transportation Board member.



Ed Harrison, an incumbent, has made his mark on the council through knowledge of transportation.



Mark Kleinschmidt, an incumbent, is the youngest council member; he turned 35 this year.



Will Raymond, active on the local blog scene, serves on the town's Technology Committee.



Walker Rutherford, a recent UNC graduate, wants to improve the town's use of technology.



Bill Thorpe, a perennial candidate, has served on the council on two separate occasions.