

Jim Hassell addresses The League of Women Voters and the NAACP sponsored candidates forum Oct. 26th, 2023:

My campaign is about the life blood of Elmira: COMMUNITY. Elmira is facing serious crises, and we must all join forces to find solutions. Many people have said: it's all about our children's future, but they know that, if we don't change course, in 5, 10, 15 years, our children will mostly have fled to greener pastures, and our population will continue to decline. We have to stop the bleeding.

We must expand our community centers to offer more after-school activities, sports activities like basketball or maybe archery, which we used to have, or board and card games, and so on; lessons in the arts, music, etc.—a group of ladies I spoke with got excited by the thought that they might teach sewing and knitting; and we might offer lessons in entrepreneurship, budgeting, and other life skills. Our future means keeping our young people, and our communities, safe and healthy. And this includes fostering greater cooperation at the neighborhood level with our police and fire departments.

When I lived in a small town in Arkansas, for example, I met a gentleman who had grown up in the downtown in a family with a single parent, his mother. As a young boy, when he arrived home after school, he went the 3 or 4 blocks to the fire station, where he was adopted by the firemen and where he received his male mentoring. Sometimes, when there was a fire call, the firemen would stop at his house to take him along on their calls. Naturally, he became a fireman, and very successful. He eventually worked for FEMA, returned home to serve as fire chief, and continues his career now as a consultant. His admirable example is one that we should emulate too in our own ways. Our young people need to be inspired and encouraged that they too can overcome adversity and succeed. As I have campaigned across the city, I have met heroes just like my friend in Arkansas, people who have defeated difficult challenges, who want to help others and to give back. The key is working together as a community.

Our city must partner more closely with our local organizations and volunteers to mentor and train our youth, to incentivize them to start businesses in Elmira, and to foster in them a vested sense of belonging and responsibility. We need to change Elmira's image to promote optimism and positive change, which means working from the ground up. This too requires a Community effort.

As for city planning, I see little comprehensive vision or sense of stewardship in our leaders. Our city undertakes projects throughout Elmira in a piecemeal way, without guiding principles and a holistic plan. And it neglects our buildings and properties, just as it does our people and communities. Take a walk through our parks and have a close look at the tall weeds and the rusted out playgrounds; try, for example, to turn on the splash pad at Brand Park—it hasn't worked for years.

And look at our monumental buildings, like City Hall and Brand Park pool. Why didn't the city start planning and working to repair the clock tower in 2016, when the leaks were reportedly found, or rehabilitating Brand Park pool? How much would we have saved?

I am particularly incensed by the neglect and then backroom sale in 2020 of the Maxwell Place fire station, which was dumped off for \$1. Nothing better describes the typical neglect, secrecy and fiscal irresponsibility of our present government. And you, I and Elmira are having to pay the huge costs for our city's neglect; and it's not just in dollars. It's in our collective soul, our sense of community, our loss of pride.

When I think of the pride, taste, sense of community, conviction, and vision that drove our predecessors, the real builders of Elmira, I wonder what drives our current leaders. Have you seen the catch-phrase on our city's webpage: "Honoring the past and building the future." Our ancestors could have posted that phrase honorably, but today, if the city were honest (and showed our true reality), it should write: "Dishonoring, or more appropriately, destroying the past and impoverishing our future."

The decay is not confined just to the city's property. Year after year, it is penetrating nearly all of our neighborhoods. How many of you are losing value in your home because you live near a decaying house, which, by the way, also causes your taxes to rise? What has our city been doing to address this crisis? We must demand that dilapidated houses be repaired or, if necessary, torn down and rebuilt. We must increase our housing stock and incentivize local residents to buy homes to live in and take care of them and their neighborhoods. Let's also encourage our neighborhoods to develop programs of beautification and neighborhood watch. This problem of neglect, lack of stewardship, lack of enforcement and dwindling house stock are also community issues.

I have referred to taxes and waste several times. Instead of raising taxes, which our current administration seems to prefer, I propose that our city find ways to allocate funds responsibly and reduce the tax burden on the people of Elmira.

So, in addition to addressing the degradation of our housing stock, we should work to redevelop our downtown attractively, according to modern planning principles.

Downtowns are the drivers of tax revenue in most cities and, as such, they support the quality of life in their neighborhoods. With proper redevelopment, our downtown too will help take the tax burden off of Elmirans.

Likewise, the institutions that are exempt from property taxes and pay \$0 for municipal services should contribute to those services, as, for example, Cornell does to Ithaca, to the tune of about \$4 million annually. I do not mean to suggest, however, that we ask for that amount from any one organization, just an appropriate contribution.

We must also put a moratorium on allowing these same institutions and others to tear down houses and neighborhoods to build parking lots. Allowing that practice generally removes those properties from the tax rolls, causes your and my taxes to rise and leads to greater blight. We have far too many parking and vacant lots already. By the way, the most recent example of this policy took place just this past August on N. Main.

Other cost- and tax-saving proposals I would like the city to consider are the following: Let's convert the city to green energy. Not only will it serve the health of our planet, it will lower the city's energy expenses and save money.

In addition, we should:

- Encourage the growth of small businesses locally
- Promote tourism (river, museum of the history of the fire industry). I will address tourism in more detail in a moment.
- Allocate funds more efficiently, with long-term planning in mind. For example, let's set aside money for the upkeep of the city's properties and maintain them as needed, so we avoid these multi-million dollar outlays and waste.
- Adopt a comprehensive plan based on modern planning practices with design principles to ensure that we don't permit the malling of our downtown.

There are many more issues. For the sake of time, I'd like to mention 2 in particular: tourism and recreation, and I refer you to my website for other topics, like homelessness, mental illness, drug addiction, affordable housing..., even hens in the city).

Not only should we increase recreational opportunities in our parks—(and it's not hard to find out how; just walk around the districts and ask. I can assure you that a splash pad is not a top priority to the people in district 5)—we must vigorously begin to promote tourism here. I propose that we re-obtain the Maxwell Place fire station and acquire some of the America LaFrance buildings and others and begin to establish a museum that celebrates the history of the fire industry in Elmira. Not only would it draw tourists, but it would go a long way to support revitalization of districts 4 and 5, preserve some of our magnificent historical monuments and be a source of great pride to our community. I remember, as a boy scout, visiting the local fire station and sliding down the pole. Let's make the Maxwell Place fire station especially child friendly.

It is also time that we reclaimed our beautiful river and stopped living under the stormy tear-down mentality of '72. It is one of our greatest resources. Let's work with our state and federal agencies and representatives to take it back, make it accessible throughout Elmira, beautify it and develop its recreational potential. Not only will that bring us together as a community, it will enhance tourism and be a huge stimulus to our downtown, both northside and southside.

For too long we have suffered under a suffocating status quo and failed government. Like many cities, we have fallen under the trend toward the uglification of America. Our ancestors would be horrified. Towns that are thriving today encourage attractive, welcoming redevelopment, historic preservation, small business growth, downtown walkability, inclusivity and diversity, cooperation, transparency, in short, COMMUNITY. If we are to survive and thrive, we must embark on a new course in which we are all vested and committed, where we all work together and where we become more politically engaged and demand greater accountability of our leaders. We must stop the exodus of our youth and cultivate the green pastures here at home. We must turn Elmira from a Drive-through to a DRIVE-TO city.