



# **Candidate Questionnaire for Whitewater Municipal Election**

**April 3, 2018**

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## **Councilmember at Large: Brienne Diebolt-Brown**

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### **What motivates you to want to become or seek another term as a Common Council member?**

I feel like I've been training for elected public service my whole life. I was born into a military family where everyone volunteered for war, soup kitchens, barn raisings, Chautauqua, and church functions, because that was just what you did for your country and your community. I started reading newspapers regularly by the time I was 10 years old. Being a citizen who participates fully in my community is part of my genetic fabric. After moving to Whitewater and finding myself in love with Wisconsin, I want to share my skills, breadth of knowledge, and respect for my community in a way that can add to the vitality of our town. This region is rapidly growing, and big changes are coming. I've seen them before, and I want Whitewater to be prepared.

### **What aspects of your background will help you best represent the people of Whitewater on the Council?**

I've worked in journalism for an online research website covering world affairs, as a state employee working for the Texas public health department, as a teacher, a factory worker, as a waitress and in kitchens. I've lived all over the world and broken bread in many languages. All people matter to me – no matter their politics, religion, ethnicity. I respect the lives that we all have lived. My experience working in a number of professions and across the world gives me a breadth and depth of knowledge that can give a much-needed window of fresh air to an approach that may not have changed in years. I plan to live here and be a part of the community for the rest of my life, and I'm committed to helping my children and the rest of our community live the best lives possible here in Whitewater.

### **What role can the Council play in restoring a grocery store to Whitewater?**

The Council can support locally-driven community revitalization such as our Whitewater Grocery Co. and invest in smart infrastructure that creates lasting value. Cities like Viroqua, WI have more than 3,500 grocery store owners in their town of 4,362. This is the perfect example of a town that espouses and lives by the community values that built our towns and our state. Our towns were built by hardworking immigrants who banded together to help each other. The Common Council's job is to hear all citizens and engage them, and maybe even search out some state and national support that comes directly from our taxes. Cynicism is not an option.

### **What role can the Council play in maintaining and improving the quality of public education in Whitewater?**

The research has been in for decades. We need to maintain our commitment to the arts and reintroduce manual skills and checkbook skills. But, we also need to introduce a second language in our elementary schools. Numerous studies have shown that brains raised on more than one language are more flexible and better able to learn other languages like science and math. Learning a second language even enables people to learn their own language better and develop critical thinking skills. We need to have a serious discussion about creating more opportunities to learn a second language and committing to hiring foreign-language teachers for all grade levels. If you look at the super wealthy kids across America who are going to private schools, this is exactly the kind of education their parents are paying for. The Council has a much smaller – and separate - budget than the school district, but the Council should demonstrate leadership and make overtures to the public and school board to consider steps toward preparing our children for a future where they really can achieve anything they want.

### **How can the retail environment in Whitewater be enlivened?**

This process is already underway. Three years ago, I helped found the Tuesday Market, which hosted on average 50 vendor stalls, attracted thousands of patrons, and gave hundreds of pounds produce to the Food Pantry. A grocery store would provide a much-needed anchor. However, we need to brand our city better. By this, I don't mean put together an art project or a pretty picture on paper that gets sent out to the newspapers. We need to bring together the community and figure out what Whitewater IS. My initial thoughts are agritourism - we are a bread basket, and within that bread basket are numerous farmers and the Kettle Moraine forest. We have old-school family farmers, conventional farmers, and an influx of young millennial organic farmers. We live in an area that still hosts a diversity of butterflies and birds and trees. On top of the events we already do in Whitewater – such as the 4<sup>th</sup> of July and Discover Whitewater - we could have a “Monarch Butterfly Festival” or a “Bee Festival” with informational sessions, interactive workshops, and opportunities for local businesses to sell prairie and woodland plants that encourage biodiversity. We could reward farmers for planting rows of native plants between their crops and at the periphery of the fields to encourage pollination. We could add in 5ks and other fun events during these seasonal festivals. We should build bike trails that connect towns, like the Village of Sharon, WI, where

famous cyclists from across the world train on their country roads. We should encourage farmers to erect picturesque roadside fences and walls, so that our retirees cycle here instead of in Great Britain.

### **What can the council do to improve town-gown relations?**

It's a structural issue. In the past few years, many more new faculty members and their families live in Whitewater, including my family. But the problem is that most faculty families are two-income families. Spouses are going to find jobs in larger towns if none are available here. This results in trying to split the difference and finding a house in a nearby town or having one spouse suffer and do all the commuting. Whitewater could work on enticing more white collar jobs to town. The more important part of the structural issue is the inflated prices for housing. Most towns this size have a residential 60/40 split – family-owned vs. rental market. But the 60/40 split is actually flipped in Whitewater. This results in inflated prices for homes that need a lot of work and a lot of updating. Many faculty families live in Fort Atkinson because housing is more affordable. Hence we have a lot of empty homes for sale that won't sell, because their owners are under the impression that they're worth more than they are. I suggest that the city revisit its contract with Accurate (based in Elkhorn) and see if we can find an assessor that is more realistic about the actual value of its family homes.

### **What would you do to encourage broader citizen participation in municipal government?**

I would start young. I propose creating a youth advisory group – and even a youth post on the Common Council that has a representative from the high school student council. I also think that we have a subpar method of communicating with our residents. We have out-of-town papers that occasionally cover town, we have the Whitewater Banner – which you have to remember to check, if you even know it exists. We should have a weekly paper that is delivered to doorsteps or digitally so that everyone knows that they are a member of the community and that they have a say.

### **What can the Council do to help give the public library the space it needs?**

The Council should assist the library board in having community hearings regarding the needs of the library. The library board has ample evidence that the library is one of the more commonly used public spaces for meetings. In fact, it is often overbooked. There is also a great need for adolescents and children to have spaces to learn, create, and socialize. The city could help the library board create RFPs (requests for proposals) for public/private partnerships so that the library could be a multi-use space that may even host housing, a food pantry, a grocery store, city archives or conference spaces.

### **What can the Council do to promote gun safety in our community in the face of inaction from Madison and Washington, D.C.?**

Since I grew up in a gun owning family and shot my first deer at 9-years-old, I have always respected guns as weapons. I would encourage commonsense and local

responses, such as encouraging people to secure their weapons. Guns should always be locked up. Gun violence costs the United States \$229 billion annually. 61 percent of suicides occur by gun, and an unacceptable number of children die each year because guns are not stored responsibly. The Common Council could speak with one voice and call on the Federal government to allow Federal research on gun violence. We could look into the inexpensive Government Accountability Office (GAO) programs where free locks are given away to families to lock up guns. The GAO also calls on city councils to host discussions on how to approach guns in a household and a community. I would look forward to organizing these conversations, and others with other interested community members.

**What can the Council do to support the immigrant population of Whitewater?**

Hire a translator and have everything translated into Spanish, as that is our primary immigrant population in Whitewater.

**How might public transportation in Whitewater be improved given the merger of UW-Whitewater and UW-Rock County?**

UWW has already started working on SPIN, a bike share program meant to get commuting students from northernmost parking lots, and the city has also signed on. The UWW business school has already created a ride-sharing app that could be tailored to this particular situation. It is amorphous how much traffic patterns are going to change, since a lot of required coursework will be offered online. However, once we get more information, there are a number of options. The Council could revisit the previous partnership with Generac and the UWW regarding bus service to and from Janesville. We could also look at state and federal grants that help with creating a small electric bus/trolley service that does a loop down Main Street, past the Innovation Center through campus, past commuter parking lots. The grocery store and heavily populated student housing. These electric buses essentially hold 12-15 people, and small towns and universities across the country have them.