



# **Buildings, businesses and the riverfront topics of discussion at Alton Main Street Mayoral Forum**

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March 17 2017 5:18 AM



**ALTON** - A third mayoral candidate forum in this election cycle was held Wednesday, March 15, 2017, at 7 p.m. at the Riverbender.com Community Center by Alton Main Street.

Five questions were given in advance to Scott Dixon, Dan Rauschkolb, Joshua Young and current Alton Mayor Brant Walker, and each candidate was given either one or two minutes to answer each question after being invited to introduce themselves for four minutes. The debate was moderated by Wesley Bell - an Alton native who now serves on the Ferguson City Council and moderated the St. Louis mayoral debates.

## **Introductions**

**Brant Walker (BW):** Walker said his administration has seen a safer, stronger and more prosperous Alton. He said he have overseen "unprecedented growth emerging from stagnation." He said he expanded Alton's "innovative" business retention program, which visits local businesses and hears their concerns. Walker said as many as 130 businesses have positively responded to this. He also boasted more than 200 business licenses being issued under his administration, with \$56 million in capital investments coming from business permits alone. He also said unemployment has dropped from 11.6 percent to 7.1 percent under his administration, and increased retail sales by as much as \$35 million as overall crime has decreased by as much as 5.8 percent. He also retold the story of how he was able to secure a street sweeper for the city under a tight budget, because there was not one when he entered office in 2013. He said the work was "far from complete," however.

**Scott Dixon (SD):** Dixon said he saw an Alton, which was not going in the right direction. Through various door-to-door campaigns and coffee meetings with its citizens, Dixon raised several concerns about the current administration saying, "if I had any doubts Alton needed to be heading in a different direction before meeting with these people, those doubts are completely gone now." He said Alton was deteriorating, and he wanted to work to improve neighborhoods and "give the amphitheater back to the people." He said Alton was facing a five-year high in violent crime after five years of decrease. He said if Alton was heading in the right direction, it would not require a Community Relations Commission to bring concerns to the city. Dixon said the future of Alton could not be based on "random projects." He said part one of his plan would be to "modernize Alton's appeal" through objectives such as code enforcement and community policing. Part two, he said, would be building trust through transparency, ethics and accountability. Part three, he said, would be moving forward with a city plan based on citizen need, saying Alton needs to get in front of problems instead of reacting.

**Joshua Young (JY):** Young said he received a lot of his morals from his experience in the Alton School District. He said he learned how to "stand up for the little guy" against bullies. He said he joined the United States Marine Corps from 1997-2003, where he served in both legal and administrative capacities. He said his time in Alton and as a Marine made him want to work toward social advocacy. He said to show that, he is running on the Progressive Democrat platform, begun by former President Theodore

Roosevelt and continued through former President Barrack Obama and former presidential candidate Bernie Sanders. He said he wanted to "toot the horn" for Alton Main Street, saying his administration would encourage advocacy groups such as theirs to continue the work they are doing. He said he would work with such groups to improve Alton and make it a more "harmonic" city.

**Dan Rauschkolb (DR):** Rauschkolb said he, his wife and their children moved to Alton from Belleville 22 years ago, so he could take a job in the Alton Police Department, where he now serves as a lieutenant. He said his wife is also a business owner. He said the couple loves Alton, and have lived in several neighborhoods throughout the city. He said he was near the end of his policing career, and has been asked why he wants to run for mayor. He said he is running, because he drives around Alton everyday, seeing it both at its best and worst. He said he was not one to look at statistics, but knew from experience Alton needs better roads, sidewalks and employment opportunities. If elected, he said he would work toward creating a technology and biotech based district in Alton, build senior housing to bring ageing populations back to Alton from Godfrey and create a Heroin Task Force to help make Alton safer. He said the Alton Police Department has been conducting community policing for years, and constantly will improve.

**Question 1: What is your stance on historic preservation? How can the city work to adapt or give incentives to the use of old buildings?**

**SD:** Dixon said the history of Alton was "an asset." He cited Galena, Illinois, as an example of what Alton could be if the city worked harder to preserve its historic buildings. He said Galena was the third most popular tourist destination in Illinois, adding it was "in the middle of nowhere." He said Alton's position near St. Louis with major highways, an airport and an incoming high-speed rail system should make it even better. He also said Alton has more historic buildings than Galena. He said his administration would work toward filling those old buildings with businesses, which would generate more income to maintain them, overall. He said the city would lose more by letting those buildings be lost than if they worked proactively to maintain them. He said as much as \$5 million in TIF funds was "gathering dust," while several of Alton's historic buildings were falling into disrepair. He said his administration would have high standards of infrastructure to better accentuate Alton's historic appeal, and promised to work with groups such as Alton Main Street, the Riverbend Growth Association and the Alton Area Landmarks Association to better preserve Alton's history.

**JY:** Young said he was 100 percent in favor of preservation "of all demographics." He said he planned to add a new historic district in Alton to showcase its rich African-American history as well. He described Downtown Alton as Alton's "face and smile."

He said that face needs an assessment, adding his administration would seek grants to help business owners keep the integrity of their buildings. He also agreed with Dixon's stance, saying he would also reach out to groups such as Main Street to make sure things happen. He referred to these groups as "champions who have worked countless hours to enhance the area." He said Alton's historic buildings stand out and speak to the city's antiquity.

**DR:** Rauschkolb said he would work to "keep Alton unique," saying its history helps define its character. He said the city needs to develop a plan for future developments, which takes into account what will happen with the old. He said the city needs to "encourage preservation." He said his administration would identify local stakeholders, adding he would work to revitalize both the Stratford and the old YMCA building, saying he would also add a convention center to the Downtown Alton area. He said resources must be found to properly preserve Alton's history.

**BW:** Walker said Alton was full of various styles of historic architecture. He said his administration has worked with businesses to create incentives for businesses to maintain their historic buildings, including making up to \$10,000 available for facade grants, which can be used for exterior renovations. He also said TIF grants could be used for even more than 25 percent of a project's cost, depending on the scope of the project. He said those methods have been used to preserve the historic World's Fair Building, the old post office, and the Wedge Bank building already. He said Alton's history and architecture were reasons he moved his family to Alton 24 years ago. He said he has worked on several historic buildings himself, adding his current home was constructed in 1885.

## **Question 2: What is the role of the city in helping local businesses succeed?**

**JY:** Young said the local businesses in Alton are being started by the city's "sons and daughters," adding he would expand what Walker was already doing. He said he would make it his administration's priority to help people start businesses, saying the city owes its sons and daughters "definitive advocacy" in getting the businesses off the ground and helping them to thrive. He said the median age in Alton is 35, so he asked himself what 35-year-olds wanted from life. He said they wanted to buy a new home and raise families, so he said he would work to bring more family-friendly businesses to Alton.

**DR:** Rauschkolb said he would help local businesses thrive by creating a friendly atmosphere for businesses to start in Alton. He said a strong community would create a strong drive for the success of local businesses. He said he would get rid of the city's "unreasonable fees," saying he would get rid of starting fees and "cut red tape." he also

said he would create a technology and biotech district in Alton, complete with free access to Wi-Fi. He said he would work to create better roads and ADA-compliant sidewalks as well.

**BW:** Walker said he would continue what he was doing. He said grants, TIF funds, facade grants and a streamlined government were already brought to the table for local businesses by his administration, but said more could be done. He said he would consult local stakeholders for help, saying it was not the city's job to select which businesses are winners and losers. He said he would work to create an atmosphere suitable for more diverse businesses, adding he twice cast the deciding vote to allow Grand Piasa Body Art to open on Broadway. He also mentioned the success of Piasa Armory, saying Alton's retail diversity would be key to its future.

**SD:** Dixon said he would first establish confidence by reworking the city's two-decade-old plan. He said he would then work toward top-notch infrastructure. He said part one of his plan, Dixon said he would focus on appeal. He said downtown needs more customers, which will make businesses more profitable and, therefore, make Downtown Alton more appealing to potential business owners, and help existing owners expand. Dixon said Alton needs to prioritize what makes it unique, saying it needs more support to grow. He promised to support entrepreneurs and investors. He warned against attracting only a certain sort of business, but agreed with Walker it was not the city's job to pick winners and losers. He finished by stating Downtown Alton needs more public safety assurance as well.

### **Question 3: In addition to big box and franchise stores, how will your administration work to attract and maintain local businesses?**

**DR:** Rauschkolb said he would create a Jobs Task Force and attract businesses through college-based training centers. He said he would demonstrate support through fostering community relations. He said he would increase local business success through a strategic economic development plan as well as future sustainable growth and development.

**BW:** Walker said his "prime goal" was developing a business-friendly climate. He again mentioned the "innovative" business retention program his administration has expanded, saying he has visited the largest to the smallest businesses, seeing what they both like and dislike about running a business in Alton. He said he has a lot of experience in Alton businesses, having ran one for 17 years himself. He said he knows what it is like to work with city hall, and said up to 80 percent of new jobs will come from small businesses and the expansion of existing businesses. Walker said he would also support local high schools and programs such as Lewis and Clark Community College's YouthBuild, which supports career paths for young people in Alton.

**SD:** Dixon said big box stores and franchises are "ordinary," adding everyone likes them and "finds themselves in them from time to time." He said people will not travel to Alton for those businesses, instead saying unique, successful local businesses will bring more people. He said small businesses would also be more likely to set up shop in old historic buildings, saying established franchises preferred strip malls or building their own buildings. Dixon said he would work to enhance "one-stop shopping" at local businesses, and said groups like Alton Main Street need to be enhanced by the city, and a new plan must be made, which will encompass TIF dollars as well.

**JY:** Young said he would bring Progressive advocacy to his administration, saying he would prioritize attracting businesses through business incubators. He said the city needs to open more doors, adding he would consider even expanding the TIF district. He said he would give as many opportunities as possible to help the constituents, including providing renewable energy, which he said would reduce their energy footprint and increase purchasing power. He said he would also work to create "new zones" for people, which will bring economic support for the city.

**Question 4: What are your ultimate goals for developing the riverfront, including public utilization of the amphitheater?**

**BW:** Walker said the amphitheater has 45 open days this season for public use. He said members of the public have to go to the Amphitheater Commission to request its use, saying the commission's main concern was whoever using it having enough resources to cover the costs. He said the amphitheater has brought thousands of people to the city through national musical acts, a food truck festival, movies being shown and fireworks. He also said an upcoming craft beer festival would bring people to the amphitheater. He said as much as \$3 million in economic impact was generated through events at the amphitheater, according to the Alton Conventions and Visitors Bureau. He said the city was currently working on phase eight of the riverfront plan, adding the Supreme Court has upheld a mandate for the riverfront to be used as a commons area, adding entities such as the Argosy Alton Belle Casino, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and railroads have easements there as well. Part of phase eight, Walker said, was expanding the bike trail to encompass more area.

**SD:** Dixon again referred to the riverfront as Alton's "crown jewel," saying it acted as a front door, which could use some improvement. He said a lot could be done with it, despite restrictions set upon it to be used as a commons. He said there were "no limits" on park-like uses. He said he was in talks with the Argosy Alton Belle Casino, and while he would not disclose the nature of those discussions, he did say the casino was more than willing to work with the city to make access to the riverfront more widely available with better aesthetics and greater connectivity.

**JY:** Young agreed with Dixon's assessment of the riverfront as Alton's "crown jewel." He said he wanted people crossing the bridge to see the riverfront and see it as inviting. He said visiting the riverfront should be one of the first things visitors to Alton do. He said they should "be compelled to do so." He said he would work to make the riverfront more inviting to families, and maximize its appeal, "both day and night." He also said he would work to make the amphitheater both more accessible to the public, but also making room for musical acts beyond just rock and country, adding hip-hop and reggae as future possibilities.

**DR:** Rauschkolb said controlling floods should be more of a priority for Alton. He described floods as a "constant problem," saying, while they could not be stopped, they could be better controlled. He said his administration would work with the Army Corps of Engineers to secure more portable flood barriers to control flooding, so the city would not have to construct a temporary flood wall 1,000 feet long, which is one of Walker's most spoken-of accomplishments, every time it floods. He also criticized how much riverfront space is currently being utilized as a valet lot for a casino. He said his administration would add more to the riverfront, saying he would work on fishing areas on the western side of it, and may even look into construction of an ice-skating rink, like the one in Forest Park in St. Louis. He said such rinks are not very expensive, and could be enjoyed by the public.

### **Question 5: What would your administration do to help enhance Alton's "front door?"**

**SD:** Dixon said he would continue the improvement made to Downtown Alton and the riverfront over the years, adding some areas have gotten more attention than others. He said the pedestrian bridge has become a disappointment, despite his early support for the project. He said it, and the rest of the city, needs to look "clean and crisp." He advocated improvements, such as way-finding signage to help visitors better find their ways around the city. He said he wanted people to "go to Alton instead of go through Alton." He said the city needs to take better care of sidewalks, streets and empty lots as well.

**JY:** Young advocated the way-finding signage, adding his administration would work to make Alton more modern through the use of renewable energy technology. He said he would do things such as add solar-powered streetlights to not only beautify Alton, but add to its beautification. He again thanked Alton Main Street for the work they do for the city and its beautification.

**DR:** Rauschkolb said the removal of graffiti would be one of his number one priorities for improving Alton's front door. He said the city also needs to better enforce building codes and work toward repairing broken windows and buildings. He said such initiatives should have been done four years ago. He said he would work to continue efforts to

reduce litter, saying Mac's Timeout has improved the Downtown area through its purchasing of several trash bins. He also said he would advocate more green space and additional street and sidewalk repairs.

**BW:** Walker said he would continue to work on street improvements, adding his administration intends to add more way-finding signage in the future as well. He said the pedestrian bridge and Flood Memorial were also improvements to downtown, adding signage would "decrease clutter." He was also in favor of converting empty lots into "pocket parks." He said he would work on street and sidewalk repairs as well as code enforcement with "manpower ability" in mind.

### **Question 6: Besides bars and antiques, what do you see as the centerpiece of Downtown Alton?**

**BW:** Walker said the development of the riverfront should be the centerpiece of Downtown Alton. He said he would continue bringing big acts to the amphitheater, again referencing the \$3 million in economic impact generated by it. He said the Duchess Steamboat would be joining steamships from the American and Peoria lines on the riverfront this year as well. Walker also pointed to economic development taking place in Alton from State Street to Ridge Street. He said he would not have dreamed in 20 years he would say development was taking place on Ridge Street.

**SD:** Dixon said two things were the centerpiece of Downtown Alton: diversity of small local businesses and the historic look coupled with the riverfront. He said he would like to support and enhance that appeal while spreading the word to St. Louis media outlets, so more people from the St. Louis Metro Area know what Alton has to offer.

**JY:** Young said Alton's cultural diversity is the centerpiece of the city. He said families should be able to walk around Downtown Alton to shop and do cultural activities. He said Alton needs to celebrate more music, adding the Miles Davis statue and Blue Note jazz bar as steps in the right direction. He said Alton needs more music festivals to celebrate its local talent as well.

**DR:** Rauschkolb said Alton is and always was a river town. He said that status is its centerpiece. He said Alton's history is what makes it special as well. He said the economic status and cultural tourism Alton maintained as a river town is what "made it great" at the turn of the 20th Century, and it would continue to "make it great" into the future.

### **Question 7: What would you do with the empty buildings in Alton?**

**SD:** Dixon said he would work to expand state grants to improve empty buildings. He said he would work on creating a new comprehensive city plan, which would include what to do with those buildings. He said he would also advocate strict code enforcement for the owners of these buildings, adding a destructive fire is much more likely in an unoccupied building than one with inhabitants. He said he would also hold business owners accountable for their buildings.

**JY:** Young also advocated "huge accountability" to the business owners. He asked why the city was not currently holding business owners accountable for the conditions of their buildings. He admitted some of the buildings could not currently be repaired, lamenting something could have been done if owners had been more proactive with their buildings. He said he would advocate legal action against business owners who did not take care of their buildings.

**DR:** Rauschkolb said he would treat building owners the same as homeowners, adding he would continuously fine building owners for not maintaining their properties, saying he would fine them every month until it was fixed. He said he would use that money to help other responsible business owners maintain their properties. He said there was no excuse for broken windows and graffiti anywhere in Alton.

**BW:** Walker announced the Alton Cine was going to be demolished after a lengthy court battle. He also said the old Hudson Jewelers building behind Riverbender.com was also going to be demolished. Walker said property owners in Illinois have a lot of rights, and many building owners in Alton have abundant resources to continue these lengthy court battles. He said his administration was also engaged in a "long fight" against an undisclosed building owner on Broadway regarding that property. He asked the audience what should be done with buildings, such as the Towata Building, which is full of history, but in awful condition with limited resources to fix it.

### **Question 8: What would your administration do to revitalize the Alton Square Mall?**

**JY:** Young said the Alton Square Mall building had great potential. He said it could be utilized to house local businesses or be used to study creative arts such as music. He said it was a "great location," but said the city was "letting it go." He said he would like to see it used for education or business incubation.

**DR:** Rauschkolb said malls are dwindling in the country, adding he was not sure if it could be revitalized. He said it could become something recreational, such as an indoor

water park, and agreed with Young it could be used for education - much like a college or training center. He said the problem would be finding investors to make it so. He said the mall would never be what it once was.

**BW:** Walker said the Alton Square Mall was in the hands of the Hall Group, which owns as many as 30 malls across the country. He said his administration was in constant contact with the Hull Group, and congratulated them on their foresight to purchase the property, which once housed Macy's, before Macy's closed its doors. He said big things were in the future for the mall. He said retail numbers under his administration reflected that, hitting a 17-year high only a few years after suffering a 15-year low.

**SD:** Dixon agreed with Rauschkolb's assessment that traditional malls are dying. He said he would love to see it come back, but had doubts it would. He said the city was limited with the things it could do with the mall, saying it would have to bring ideas to the Hall Group. If the mall were to collapse, however, Dixon said the first step would be finding an alternative use for the building, agreeing with both Young and Rauschkolb it could be used for education and recreation, adding office space as another possibility for the building. He said such ideas would be "new, uncharted territory" for Alton.

## **Conclusions**

**DR:** Rauschkolb said he was asking for votes out of respect. He said the city needs to respect its citizens, adding there were some problems with Alton "no one can solve." He said Alton is an outstanding community with great people. He said, however, the city cannot sit and wait for things to happen, adding he was tired of "seeing other cities get stuff, but not Alton."

**BW:** Walker said Dixon's idea for an updated plan may be feasible, but would still cost as much as \$100,000. He said an entirely new plan would cost as much as \$200,000 and take as long as two years to implement. He said he has done a lot for roads, sidewalks, businesses and crime numbers.

**SD:** Dixon said "a lot was at stake" in this election. He asked the audience if they wanted the status quo, or wanted something better. He said Alton should be better regardless of the administration, due to the U.S. economic growth in general. He asked if people wanted to "rise with the tides," or take control of the city and make sure it is good compared to the region. He said Alton has higher unemployment than the state, region and nation (true), saying Walker's claim of issuing more than 200 business licenses does not make up for 280 businesses closing under his administration. He said Walker's claim of 3,300 code enforcement citations does not compare to the former administration's more than 6,000 citations. He said he, Young and Rauschkolb would not be running if the city was not in need of a change.

**JY:** Young said he wanted to serve Alton with his Progressive values. He wants to stand against social inequity and give a voice to people who may not be heard otherwise. He said he wants to have an administration with compassion. He said he was running for the unheard demographics. He said he would have an administration with passion, saying his opponents' passions for the city would be welcomed at the table if he were to win. He said his passion was for the people and would work to set precedence and build a "paradigm shift."

*Additional forum questions and answers can be found from the [Community Awareness Panel](#) and the [East End Improvement Association](#) debates.*