



Let's Talk: Big Z interviews three of four Alton mayoral candidates

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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ALTON - Local radio station WBGZ hosted a live broadcast of a debate between Alton mayoral candidates Scott Dixon, Joshua Young and current Alton Mayor Brant Walker during a special edition of its Let's Talk program Wednesday, March 29.

The conversation was moderated by radio personality Mark Ellebracht who hosts the show. It was broadcast live, starting at 6 p.m. Wednesday evening and replayed in its entirety at 10 a.m. Thursday, March 30, on WBGZ, which can be heard on both 1570 AM and 94.3 FM within the Riverbend area. A [podcast](#) of the debate is also on the station's website. Candidate Dan Rauschkolb could not attend the conversation due to "scheduling conflicts," but Ellebracht was able to attain pre-recorded statements from him on Tuesday, March 28.

Each candidate was able to speak without much commercial interruption, with Rauschkolb's comments coming at the end of the show. Ellebracht said the event was more of an informal conversation, with some formalities to ensure fairness.

Introductions

Scott Dixon (SD): Dixon said he was born and raised in Alton and described the race having three challengers as extremely challenging.

"I think it's going to be a close race, so please vote," he said. "I can't emphasize that enough. Your vote really does matter, especially in a close race like this."

He introduced four "key things to think about while voting." Those key things are:

- The candidate's qualifications
- Why they're running
- What is their plan?
- Who do they represent?

Dixon said he has a master's degree in business administration, which he said qualifies him for the position of mayor, he was general manager and vice president of Dixon Distributing and a long history of volunteering.

He said he is running for mayor because he "loves Alton," and feels as if it is currently going in the wrong direction, and needed more citizen input.

"This is not about me," he said. "It really isn't. I will not be taking a pension plan or healthcare, and that should save, if I end up going for eight years, about \$130,000. I'm doing this because I love this city."

He said his platform is on his website, which includes cleaning up the city, updating the plan and creating a modern platform as well as building trust through ethics, transparency, accountability and community policing. He also said an updated plan would pay for itself by focusing spending on what citizens and business owners want.

Josh Young (JY): Young is a write-in candidate, and said he is running on the Progressive Platform. He said he was born in Alton, before "serving honorably" in the Marine Corps where he said he developed his values of citizenship. Upon returning from the Marines, he utilized the Progressive Platform as a social advocate.

"I bring to the city a Progressive Party," he said. "The Progressive Party is a tried-and-true method, starting with the Roosevelt-Era platform."

Theodore Roosevelt created the Progressive Party in the early 20th century. Most recently, it was championed by failed Democratic presidential nominee Bernie Sanders. Former U.S. President Barrack Obama also embodied several aspects of the platform.

"I followed in their footsteps," Young said. "I became an activist advocate like the Roosevelts did to challenge the power groups and the wealthy few."

He said his party stands for transparency and equity. Young said he has stood for transparency, especially in regards to the police department and with lowering crime in Belle Manor using grassroots methods. Grassroots methods, Young has said, are the foundations of the Progressive Party.

"The props go to the people of Belle Manor, who reduced their crime in 2012, which by the numbers we have been seeing, that was the year Alton had the least amount of crime," he said.

Young said he wanted to give people a chance to be a part of the city.

Brant Walker (BW): Walker said he moved to the city 25 years ago, and ran a business for 17 years with 300 employees. He said he has restored 17 properties, including one on the city's tear down list. He said Alton is safer, stronger and more prosperous. He said Alton has experienced "tremendous growth."

He again spoke of his business retention program through which he visited more than 130 small businesses, adding small businesses and expanding businesses will bring as much as 80 percent of new jobs to Alton. Through those programs and incentives, Walker said he was able to bring 200 new businesses to Alton, resulting in \$56 million in revenue from permits alone.

Walker spoke of a proactive community policing model. He said he brought the bicycles from the closet and put police officers on them.

Park grants were another part of Walker's introduction, again showcasing \$1.2 million in grants for park equipment.

He said he was able to purchase more equipment for the city to improve infrastructure, including a street sweeper - an implement the city did not have when Walker took office in 2013. The city now has two of them, Walker said.

The city has had to deal with a tight budget in recent years, mostly due to obligations in police and fire pensions they've had to deal with, also a decrease in money coming from the State of Illinois. What are some ideas that you have to deal with the financial reality that Alton faces right now and in the next four years if you are elected?

JY: Young said he would tackle the budget issue "head-on." He said the pension issues have not been spoken of in the election so far. He said he would create "innovative strategies" to do so, adding Walker's administration has seen "positive strides" economically.

"He's done some pretty positive things to move towards that, but I believe there is more that can be done," Young said of Walker. "I believe there is some more aggressive advocacy-based platform to get the entire city behind the drive, which may result in some legalities in which we can sit at the table."

Young championed more ideas from the "people's perspective," saying he wanted to have sustainable energy, agriculture and social platforms, which he said would generate more income. He also commended Walker on his service to the community and creating budget surpluses.

"If we're coming in into the green, why aren't we maximizing the usage of that surplus into the pension funds?" Young said.

BW: Walker said the city has done a tremendous job, saying the city has increased its surplus from \$300,000 to \$2.9 million during his administration, according to a third party auditor. He said the city was mandated by the court systems more than a decade ago to pay an escalating portion of pension funds, to as much as 90 percent.

An \$85 million liability, he said, adversely affects the city's budget. He said any additional budget surpluses go into a "rainy day fund." He said the city must be "business friendly" in order to generate more revenue to tackle some of those outstanding debt.

Walker showcased expansions of OSF St. Anthony's Health Center, Alton Memorial Hospital and the Hull Group at Alton Square Mall. Walker said the expansion announcements "could not have come at a better time" for him, adding he wanted to continue that course if elected.

SD: Dixon said he would first sit down with department heads and city employees to seek different ways of doing something, saying "there's always a better way, that's for sure."

Dixon agreed the city has seen budget surpluses in the last three years, but said he was told last year's budget received an unexpected payment from the Army Corps of Engineers, and without that, Dixon said the city would have experienced a deficit of more than \$130,000.

"The biggest concern I have is the financial year this year, which ends in just two days," he said. "With only two more days to go, we were just shy of a \$2 million deficit, which is a pretty big concern."

Dixon said he does not want to cut city services or outsource, leaving a "long term big picture issue" involving raising revenue without taxes. He said this could be done by keeping citizens, bringing businesses and promoting tourism.

JY: Young said the Progressive Platform brings economic gain to the city. He said high school students could be involved, and added the city needed to "be open to its dreamers." He said people should be encouraged to contribute to the city.

"I thought we had other Progressives in here, but it will be the people who help this budget problem," he said.

Young said people should be encouraged to participate, and all the city must do is remove red tape, and create a "brand" for Alton.

Ellebracht mentioned the fiasco behind Grand Piasa Body Art coming to Broadway, saying Broadway is being developed more. He asked if there was too much red tape for businesses in Alton.

BW: Walker said his administration and the city council has removed a lot of red tape. He mentioned the tattoo parlor as well as Piasa Armory and a pizza place coming to State Street. He said the city's commissions have been more open-minded about businesses coming

"There's been a lot of conversation and a lot of change in this administration about being more open-minded and being more open to people's ideas, and getting the council to agree that maybe Broadway doesn't fill up, because we say no too much, or maybe we didn't listen to the people."

Walker said the city now has an IT department, after coming into the office with "typewriters and carbon paper." He said a lot of city business can be done by citizens online, which he said opens the city to new businesses.

SD: Dixon said he would replace red tape with red carpet and make people feel welcome to businesses. He said as a business owner himself, he knew how hard opening a business could be. He said the city should have people dedicated to making businesses feel more welcome in Alton.

JY: Young spoke of red tape added by Walker to the Historic Commission. Young said, as he was trying to create an 800 parcel African American historic district in the "Mexico" area of Alton, the city originally allowed him to make the proposal for free.

"The hearing went a little lopsided," he said. "I would call that political inequity."

Young said the city then drafted an ordinance to charge \$1,800 to submit that application to "support a legacy," which he said was red tape placed by Walker.

BW: Walker said it was not free, and would cost taxpayers' money to institute.

SD: Dixon said he understood city costs, but said the district was mostly low-income and African American. He said the administration should consider the economic costs as well as the historical benefit of such an area before making decisions such as the one Walker made to charge \$1,800 in expenses.

Alton has had to deal with many issues over the years when it comes to crime, it now deals with several issues such as the heroin epidemic, theft, auto theft and even the occasional loss of life. Is Alton doing the right thing right now, is it battling the right way to improve these elements and the community?

BW: Walker said the city is "absolutely" doing the right thing and challenged Dixon's assertions that crime is a growing problem in Alton, using numbers the city submitted to the FBI to prove crime has dropped as much as 11 percent during his administration (overall crime has dropped by that amount). He also said Dixon said murders and rape had tripled, but showed they have gone down.

"We are absolutely on the right track, when I got into office, we immediately instituted a community policing program," he said.

Walker showcased several items his administration has overseen, including Shop with a Cop, Coffee with a Cop, Ballin' with a Cop, Summons of Joy, Pizza with the Police,

bicycle patrols, Domestic Violence Awareness Walk, National Night Out and amnesty days.

He also spoke about the community policing platform involving the University of Missouri St. Louis (UMSL), involving both the police department and the community.

The heroin epidemic, he described as a national problem, and said he increased the drug department 33 percent, which he said has decreased nuisance crimes and increased drug arrests. He said he has worked with departments up to the federal level to deal with the drug problem.

SD: Dixon said he wanted to continue the expansion of community policing.

He took issue with Walker's crime numbers, saying murders and rapes combined have tripled, adding the FBI changed the definition of rape while Walker was in office. He admitted total crime has decreased in Alton, saying theft has decreased by 200.

"What's more important is the violent crimes, which are the most serious crimes," he said.

Dixon said violent crime has increased in Alton under Walker, hitting a five year high in 2016 (which is true if the city's 2016 numbers are compared to previous FBI statistics, but 2014 is the five year high when compared to only the city's numbers).

"It went down steadily every year, and is now at a five-year high," Dixon said.

Walker interrupted Dixon to try to prove him wrong, and Dixon promoted his website for the numbers check. Ellebracht quieted them both.

JY: Young's mother is a retired officer from the Alton Police Department. He said the police department needs good leadership, saying he would appoint his mother as chief.

He referenced the Pizza with Police video on Riverbender.com, saying the police officers at the event have several complaints leveled against them. Young said the community still needs to heal, adding the current model of community policing is not addressing that. He said officers need to be held to the highest standards.

"As a Marine veteran, I give them no courtesy when it comes to the protection of the people," he said.

Young also said Rauschkolb has refused to be a bridge to the people, saying Rauschkolb was the immediate supervisor when two teenagers were caught on camera being maced by a police officer while on camera.

Ellebracht did not let Young continue, saying Rauschkolb was not there to defend himself.

Young said the administration should back the community as much as it backs the police department. Young said he became involved as a social advocate to help the common people have a voice. He said he still hears of the same sorts of misconduct, despite community policing. He promised no intimidation under his administration.

SD: Dixon said Walker's refusal to address violent crime means he may be less likely to devote needed resources to prevent it. He said there was a "big divide" between police department and people, saying he refused to blame anyone, adding it was part of the "crazy world we live in."

JY: Young said many crimes are "crimes of lack," which could be reduced by increasing life conditions of people trying to take, because they don't have.

Do you think the amphitheater is underused and sits empty too often? If so, how do we change it?

SD: "Everything that I see, hear and feel from people is it sits empty too often," Dixon said.

Dixon said he understood events are challenging, but said the amphitheater is too useful and beautiful to not be used. He said he did not want to criticize the amphitheater commission, but said he did not feel the amphitheater was open, adding it needs more access online.

"In the big picture, it just isn't used as much, and I would like to see it used more," he said.

Dixon also said he would look towards grants to improve the amphitheater, so it would be cheaper to do events.

He cited the restriction of the riverfront's usage as the commons area, saying he wanted to take a fresh look at the riverfront to see how it could be better. He said he would seek grants to improve the area, which he described as Alton's jewel and front door.

JY: Young said the question was part of his Progressive Platform, saying the amphitheater is too difficult to utilize for local groups. He said the amphitheater would be a better revenue builder if people could utilize it how they want, promising a "cultural renaissance" if he was elected.

He said he would like to bring back the Alton Expo, which he enjoyed in his youth. He said people shouldn't have to fight for new things at the riverfront, but instead bring new ideas.

He said the riverfront and amphitheater will be used more by local groups if he were elected. He said Alton was a "musical town," saying local music could have shows there.

"It's about opening yourself, and getting out of that box," he said.

Young advocated saying what could be done, instead of dwelling on what cannot or what is not occurring.

BW: Walker said the amphitheater did not do much when he took office. He said the amphitheater no longer costs the city money, due to corporate sponsorship. He said an economic impact of \$3.3 million has come to the city through tens of thousands of people coming to shows there.

He cited an article in Riverbender.com regarding its usage, saying the amphitheater has a "great website" and is easily accessible and affordable. He promised the commission would work with groups attempting to host events at the amphitheater.

Walker said he can see Riverfront Park from his office, saying he sees kids playing in the newly-fixed fountain his administration repaired.

He said the riverfront is turning into a "mini tourism port," saying more steamboat companies are using the riverfront as a docking point for their tourists.

Free events such as the Food Truck Festival and fireworks show are also growing at the amphitheater, Walker said.

As far as the riverfront is concerned, Walker said railroad easements as well as easements from the Army Corps of Engineers prevent the city from developing more there.

SD: Dixon said the amphitheater has room for improvement, saying various groups are "effectively permitted" from using the amphitheater due to the amount of red tape

involved. He said he met of Robert Stephan from the amphitheater commission, admitting the amphitheater's website was "really nice."

He also advocated more regional and local acts to supplement the national acts, saying "it's all up for negotiations."

Dixon said he would work closely with the Alton Conventions and Visitors Bureau to increase tourism.

JY: "From what Mayor Walker has said, the entire riverfront has gone to private interests, and as a Progressive, I am against that all the way," Young said.

Young said he appreciated and advocate local DIY music venues, saying he would like to see them use the amphitheater. He said they feel like they cannot use the amphitheater, due to red tape.

BW: Walker said the amphitheater is like any other park, and is welcome to public use. He said booking is important, however, so it is not overbooked. He said the park board would create a schedule for its usage to ensure everyone can use it and it is not overbooked.

JY: Young said booking was not the issue, but the issue was instead the perception of the amphitheater being difficult to utilize by the people. He said the national acts come to the city, and half the city does not participate due to expenses or the music not fitting tastes.

He said the Alton CVB should expand the diversity of acts as well, and expand from country.

SD: Dixon agreed with Josh, and said more frequent small acts could add to the diversity. He said smaller acts may be willing to play for free for the exposure. Dixon said he wanted to utilize more at Riverfront Park including diversity.

JY: Young said he wanted to advocated for fisherman, and said he would give people a place to fish in Alton.

"We're a river city, and we don't have a fishing place?" He said.

Dixon agreed with Josh's assessment and importance of fishing places, saying the city needs to connect more to the river.

How do we attract, how do we make it easier for large retailers, medium sized industry or mom and pops?

JY: Young said his Progressive Platform gave a blueprint for attracting businesses, which he said gave him an advantage over his opponents, who are declared independents. He said the people of the city should decide what is best.

He said Mayor Walker has done an excellent job building the city, but said the city needed a brand, which would be a way of creating more revenue sources.

Young championed green energy and other methods to offset costs of mom and pop stores to help them become sustainable. He said Alton needs more homeowners, so the renter to homeowner ratio improves. He said that ratio currently stops bigger businesses from coming to Alton.

"We have a lot of room to grow, let's do production and manufacturing to produce green energy and give them to our citizens," he said.

Young said he would let the people create the city in which they wanted to live.

BW: "You're going to see a lot of what we've done be continued," Walker said.

Walker said as a business and property owner in Alton, he experienced red tape firsthand and worked against it. He said he will continue to work on infrastructure to assist businesses in making things easier.

"The best thing a city can do is create a business-friendly environment," he said.

He used development on Broadway all the way to Ridge Street as proof his policies are working to bring and maintain businesses. He said Broadway would be completely redone next year, using grants.

He said unemployment numbers and business expansions in Alton prove his policies have worked during his administration, adding he would like to continue to improve.

SD: Dixon said the majority of jobs will be created by small businesses, which are a main focus of his. He also wants to refill empty buildings across Alton, saying what does that is having customers.

"There's a symbiotic relationship between quality of life, tourism and all the things you can do to make the city more appealing," he said.

Dixon said old factory sites could be utilized as warehouses and wholesale centers. He said water, highway and railroad access on those old factories could be utilized well.

He also said unemployment in Alton grew from 7.1 percent to 8.5 percent, a jump Dixon said could be attributed to holiday terminations.

BW: Walker said his administration has seen a \$35 million uptick in retail sales. He said that is proof the city and the Alton CVB's tourism measures are working.

JY: Young asked Walker where the extra money is being reinvested.

BW: Walker said two percent of retail sales are returned to the city's budget. He said it goes into the general funds, which pays for the city's departments.

SD: Dixon said it is good to see retail numbers increasing. He said several malls are closing across the nation, adding it was good to see the Hull Group reinvesting into the Alton Square Mall.

Dixon said Alton has fewer businesses now than before Walker took office. He said as many as 285 businesses have closed, despite 200 new businesses opening.

BW: Walker disputed those numbers, adding Dixon did not get the restaurant or liquor licenses from his office.

JY: Young said the city's unemployment numbers mostly affected African American people, which he said can be shown through crimes of lack. He asked why the community oriented policing model did not include job building and skill instruction.

BW: Walker said YouthBuild from Lewis and Clark Community College has helped provide job skills to at-risk people, and said OSF St. Anthony's is looking for more nurses - a skill also taught by the college.

What is the responsibility of the city when it comes to those quality of life issues?

BW: Walker said the city reaches out to private individuals for improvement. He said those issues caused him to run. He said his administration has repaired all the city's water features and has improved the city's parks through more than \$3 million in grants.

"I saw our parks and programs deteriorate," he said. "From a city's standpoint, we need things for kids to do."

Walker said he wanted to put neighborhood kids in neighborhood parks. He said he partnered with local schools to help students learn trades, utilizing some of those students to help repair Killion Park at Salu.

His administration also partnered with Alton Middle School to repair a sinkhole as well - something he said illustrates his administration's commitment to work with schools.

SD: Dixon said the city plays a "pivotal role" regarding quality of life standards. He said the first item in his platform was maximizing appeal. He said his administration would ask people near the parks what they want, and what is important to them. He also suggested possible public transportation to Gordon Moore Park to provide better access.

Dixon said he agrees with Walker about the importance of parks, saying he once was president of PRIDE, Inc. and also volunteered for the Alton Beautification Committee, which has since been dissolved. Dixon said he wanted to restore that committee, adding he thinks a lot more can be done.

He said code enforcement also needs to be increased. He said Walker has issued as many as 3,500 citations, but said more can be done.

JY: Young said not all demographics in Alton view themselves as equals. He said Hellrung Park no longer allows dogs, which he said was profiling a "minority facilitated park."

"The city owes responsibility to each demographic and social class of people," he said.

He said everybody deserves to be protected and backed by the city for their value. He said the city has to have faith in its citizens and advocate for all demographics and "equal intrinsic justice." He said the city has to harmonize to bring more equality. Young said this campaign has done a lot to bring political awareness to people, adding he will still be in Alton, regardless of who wins.

"You won't stop the people," he said. "They are aware and they are involved in their own situations."

BW: Walker said his administration does reach out to the people, illustrating a science classroom in Rock Springs Park as well as working with Drew and Hope Mader to restore Northside Park.

He said dogs were not allowed in Hellrung, because former Fourth Ward Alder Person Alice Martin, who is deceased, complained about violent dogs in the park. He said the

park is very used by children, saying Martin wanted to ban dogs for safety to children and "quite a few incidents."

JY: "Sounds like profiling to me," Young said.

Young said that same model should be applied to community policing, saying many officers act aggressively toward citizens as well.

SD: Dixon said he agreed Alton is becoming more politically aware, and offered a "high five" for his statements.