

Yellowstone County News Primary Election Questionnaire 2019 for Billings City Council.

Danny Choriki, Candidate for Billings City Council Ward 3

Please introduce yourself to our readers and please explain what inspired you to run for the Billings City Council?

I was born in Bozeman and educated in towns and cities across Montana starting in Moccasin and graduating from Great Falls HS. I left in 1984 to pursue an education and a career in New York City as an environmental social scientist. That was also the year my parents moved from Great Falls to Billings. In 2012 I came back for my dad's 80th birthday and realized if I wanted to spend time with my parents, I needed to come back to Montana as soon as possible. I spent the last six years as primary care giver for Ray and Doris Choriki and I hope I gave them some joy and comfort in their final years. The among the gifts I received from them was a sense of responsibility for the community where I live, the understanding that outcomes matter more than intentions or beliefs, and that you always try to leave a place better than you found it.

During the decades I lived in NYC, I was a student, a policy analysis, an information technology expert, and a consultant on how information and decisions flow within organizations (process engineering). Because of these experiences I view the world and the human experience as a set of systems. I am trained in analyzing complex problems in search of root causes. And like any good shade tree mechanic after analysis, I kept testing possible solutions, and don't stop until the problem is fixed.

We live in a time when we are just starting to understand the complexity of life and how to use that understanding to make the lives of as many people as possible better than they were. In many ways, this has been my life work. Our grandparents understood that we need to be guided by what works and not blinded by ideology. I try to live by that standard. When we see a problem, we try to analyze the cause of the problem and try to fix it. If the first thing you do doesn't work, analyze what happened, come up with a new plan and try that. Ideology is easy and often comforting. But it is outcomes that matter.

In the past it has been apparent that public officials have been involved behind the scenes in planning and strategies advancing public agendas without public awareness. Do you believe that such practices are appropriate? Will you commit to greater transparency in city government? Will you support public information laws?

I came of age during the Watergate and Pentagon Papers scandals. In both cases, the coverup was just as bad as, if not worse than the actual crime in the first case or series of mistakes in

the second case. Since then I have never backed away from a full-throated support of public information laws.

However, applying the principle of transparency in any bureaucracy is complicated, especially as organizations grow.

First, transparency is expensive. It requires time by employees to be involved with telling people what is going on, time that could have been used to do work. It also costs money. Websites, recording, indexing information, all of it requires a system, employees to support the system, and other incidental costs. In my experience we all want transparency, but none of us are willing to pay for it.

Second, transparency impacts on the ability of organizations to innovate, problem solve, and find compromise solutions. It is difficult to draw the line between deliberations and influences that should be public and providing a space where decision makers can spitball ideas, brainstorm, and generally try to work together to find a common solution to problems without facing public criticism. In my opinion, we currently are overregulating by insisting that most meetings of a quorum of council members be public and under regulating the public disclosure of conversations with all stakeholders. I would like to see an agenda item added to council meetings where council members are required to disclose any conversations they have had on the issue at hand with any stakeholder.

Finally, the current tools used by The City of Billings to provide information to the public about what is going on is about 20 years behind the state of the art. We need a serious commitment to investing in state-of-the-art information technology if we want more access to the decision-making process by residents and citizens of Billings. It won't be cheap and it will not happen without the political will to invest in people and resources.

Do you believe it is appropriate to put taxpayers' money – public funds – at risk in business ventures or “public-private” partnership enterprises? And why?

Governments, and The City of Billings is no exception, picks “winners and losers” all the time. We make public investments which benefit business ventures in every City Council meeting. We award contracts to one newspaper over another to publish city announcements. The building out of Grand Avenue and the Fire Station #7 on the far west end of Billings prioritizes sprawl developers on the edges of the city over infill developers in downtown, midtown and The Heights. The building of the Inner Belt Loop would be an economic windfall for the owners of land to the west of the airport.

This is a false argument that is only used by people who are opposed to any given development project.

But let's take this idea one step further. If The City of Billings had purchased the old Federal Building for \$1 and cleaned it up and modernized the building, it would have owned a serious asset in downtown Billings and the rental of that space to nongovernmental entities could have been a significant revenue stream at a time when many feel that property taxes are too high. Local governments are being tasked with more and more fiscal responsibilities and the need for new and innovative revenue streams is preferable to increasing taxes.

Finally, the accumulation of capital and its use to build new things is what capitalism is all about. And no matter how the capital is used, there is always risk. This is true for capital investments that are public, private, or public/private.

Economic development is very serious business. How and where we invest public dollars will define the future of Billings. Such actions can not be taken lightly. But they should be taken with a clear vision of the future and the use of the best data available informing market trends and public needs.

In past years, there has been a push for additional NDO (Non Discrimination Ordinance) in Billings as Missoula has done. Do you feel we need additional ordinances in Billings referring to NDO? And why?

I stand firmly by the principal that all human beings should be treated equally and fairly under the law and by the justice system. I also strong affirm that all human beings should be treated with dignity and respect by all other human beings. This is after all, the basis of the Christian notion of "treating thy neighbor as thyself". We should all strive to treat our neighbors civilly, whether we like them or not.

That said, despite the fact that Bozeman, Butte, Helena, and Great Falls along with Missoula have passed an NDO, this is an ordinance that lacks real enforcement teeth at the city level. Such offenses are more likely to appear in state or federal courts. So an NDO is more of a "feel good" act than effective legislation.

Still, people who fear physical abuse or economic retribution from their neighbors for being "different" would like the reassurance that their neighbors can accept or at least tolerate them as they are. This is the real value of Billings passing an NDO. It is a public statement that we can be civil to our neighbors and tolerate our differences.

Why would I support such an act? Because it is the American way. Being tolerant of our neighbors is the Montana Way.

5. For some time now, city government has had a policy resistant to aggressive annexation. Recent conversations seem to indicate that there is interest in reversing that policy, what do you believe should be the city's policy regarding annexing new areas?

I am not aware of any current conversation on the topic of "aggressive annexation". So I am not entirely sure which of a number of possible definitions are being used here. Here is a quick run down of what I believe relative to the growth of Billings.

In 1970, Billings has 60,000 residents and was 14 square miles in size. Today we are pushing 110,000 residents and are 45 square miles in size. Our population density has decreased from 4200 people per sq mile to 2500. To me this is aggressive annexation, specially when large areas of Billings are emptying out as green field development on the edges continues. I believe we need policies and inducements that brings development back into existing areas of Billings and reinvestment in existing buildings.

Areas like the Heights would greatly benefit economically and socially from a comprehensive development plan which enabled areas of denser commercial and residential development. There is no reason for the Heights to be a "bedroom community" requiring residents to be in their cars for 20 minutes to shop, go out to dinner or see a movie. These types of amenities can be built in the Heights with proper planning and incentives. There is already a movement to create a Business Improvement District in the Heights which I strongly support. I would also support a Tax Increment Financing district for the Heights.

Another issue for development is a closer tie between city and county development plans. While this is in some ways a state issue, it would be in the best interests of all the residents of Yellowstone County to have a shared vision for growth.

Finally, one of the definitions of "aggressive annexation" is about existing developed properties which do not pay city taxes yet are on the city/county line and benefit from city services, specially road development, parks and recreation, public safety services and economic opportunity. People often choose to live on the outside of the line so they can benefit from living next to an urban area without paying for the services. This has been an ongoing problem for regional planning for generations now. These county residents pay a property tax which is 20% lower than their city neighbors. In my opinion, they are getting a free ride and I would support looking into a process that allows them to pay their fair share.