

**Sandy Springs Council of Neighborhoods and League of Women Voters  
Candidate Questionnaire for District 3 City Council Race**

**Candidate Bio**

Chris Burnett is a native Atlantan who has lived in Sandy Springs for 25 years with his wife, Karen, and their two children. He is a 36-year community banker and serves as President of Bank of Sandy Springs, which he founded. Chris is a graduate of Georgia State University and the Graduate School of Banking at LSU. Chris' 20+ years of community volunteer service includes Board positions with the Sandy Springs Conservancy, the Sandy Springs Chamber of Commerce (twice as Chairman), and the Sandy Springs Civic Scholarship Fund. He currently serves on the city's Next 10 Strategic Planning Committee and the Economic Advisory Council and previously served on the City Springs Citizens Review Committee. Chris a member of the Holy Innocents' School Board of Trustees and a long-time church member, where he serves on the Finance Committee and he is a Sandy Springs Rotarian. He is a Board Member of the YMCA's Camp High Harbor and is currently leading the development of a new youth camp on Lake Lanier. Chris Burnett clearly understands the opportunities and challenges that face our city and his breadth and depth of experience and knowledge make him highly qualified for this District 3 council position.

**Governance**

**What is the biggest challenge in the city?**

Without a well-planned and properly executed strategic plan, Sandy Springs runs the risk of growing so quickly and so large that we smother in our own success. This is evidenced by the significant traffic congestion that now clogs our local streets. I currently serve on the city's Next 10 Strategic Planning Committee and I believe our biggest challenge and conversely our biggest opportunity is to create and successfully execute a long-range strategic vision with concrete solutions for traffic management, neighborhood and tree canopy protection, smart zoning and land use planning, green space preservation and the revitalization of aging areas like Roswell Road. A plan of this magnitude and the ability to execute it requires visionary leadership which starts with electing highly qualified individuals who possess a diverse and comprehensive background on the issues that are most crucial to our quality of life.

**What is the biggest challenge in your district?**

The biggest challenge in our district is currently traffic. With the roundabout construction on Riverside Drive, the pending growth of traffic congestion from the new Braves stadium and the thousands of Cobb County cars that congest our streets each day, we must develop a District 3 traffic plan to address these issues. One of my first jobs as our councilman will be to form a

traffic task force of community members and traffic professionals and requisition a comprehensive traffic study for District 3 to develop concrete and executable initiatives to reduce congestion, improve trip times and eliminate the cut through traffic within our neighborhoods.

## **Finance**

### **If there were a budget surplus at the end of the year, what should be done with it?**

As a fiscal-conservative, my first thought is to return the funds to our citizens. But the answer to this question is not so simple because the final decision is rooted in the community's needs at the time of the surplus. We have significant infrastructure needs, beginning with traffic management and quality of life projects like sidewalks, additional parks and greenspace and a revitalized downtown district that offers great local dining and entertainment options. As our councilman, I will evaluate our community needs and the costs thereof on at least an annual basis and determine, based on that evaluation, whether surplus budget funds are reinvested in infrastructure projects, are returned to our citizens, or perhaps a combination thereof. Our goal should always be to provide our citizens with a tremendous quality of life while assuring that our property taxes remain well below the City of Atlanta's tax rates.

### **Our property tax mill rate of 4.731 has been in place since we became a city. As population and costs increase, can the city sustain itself at that level? How and why?**

One of the many great assets of Sandy Springs is its convenience to Atlanta without the higher property taxes. Our city should consistently operate with a balanced budget while keeping taxes below Atlanta's. There are multiple ways to accomplish this. First, a vibrant, growing economy generates substantial corporate tax revenues, so keeping our city's business environment strong is crucial. Second, replacing aging commercial properties with new properties that appraise for significantly higher values not only improves the quality of properties in our city, it increases property tax revenues. Third, increasing non-property tax revenues such as permitting and licensing fees and civil penalties and fines can generate higher revenues. Fourth, strong fiscal management by our city is paramount and we must constantly evaluate our public/private partnerships to assure that we are operating at the most efficient overhead level possible while consistently meeting the needs of our citizens.

### **We have other options for funding, such as fees and local option sales taxes. What other options for funding should be considered?**

One of our most significant public safety challenges is the crime rate in our aging apartments and extended stay motels, particularly where management companies do not thoroughly vet or supervise their residents. Assessing significant penalties on apartments that repeatedly burden

our police officers with crime activity will generate more income for the city to help pay for the increased cost of crime prevention. Also, project-specific funding sources like a Traffic SPLOST specifically for Sandy Springs transportation projects could be a consideration, but we must be disciplined to assure that this tax revenue is used only for a specific project that measurably improves our city and that the SPLOST tax has a specific forward termination date that we are committed as a city to honor.

## **Infrastructure**

### **Since the majority of the tree canopy coverage is in single family neighborhoods, what step(s) would you take to maintain the preservation of this existing canopy?**

Our biggest challenge with preserving neighborhood tree canopies are the in-fill developments and tear-down, rebuild homes that are being built across our city. To address this, I will push for the elimination of clear-cutting on residential lots and will require that more specimen trees be left in place on new home sites. I will push for expanded construction site management by hiring additional city personnel to perform consistent site inspections to assure that builders obey the approved landscape and tree canopy plans. This follows the rule that we must “inspect what we expect”. I will push for measurably higher fines for those who violate the city’s ordinances, especially for repeat offenders. Finally, I will work with our neighborhoods and the Sandy Springs Conservancy to develop neighborhood “pocket parks” that provide park-like settings on interior land parcels so that greenspace can be expanded and neighbors can have places to gather.

### **Our business corridors have empty buildings and underutilized/outdated shopping centers. Through which parameters and by what process can the city evaluate and/or encourage redevelopment of these properties?**

Certain areas of the city are organically redeveloping because of their close proximity to Buckhead and downtown Atlanta, like we are seeing on Roswell Rd. south of I-285. In areas where organic redevelopment is not yet occurring, particularly in the northern district of the city, incentivizing developers by lowering impact and permitting fees and potentially working with developers, through public/private partnerships, to gain access to development bond funding at low interest rates can also help to re-energize otherwise lethargic properties and markets. But, what is most important in attracting the redevelopment of aging properties is to have a city that offers a tremendous quality of life for its residents, outstanding education for its youth, and a strong, vibrant economy for its business owners. With these critical components in place, Sandy Springs will be a highly desirable community for generations to come and redevelopment will come naturally.

**How can the city balance the need for redevelopment with the protection of nearby neighbors?**

I currently serve on the Next 10 Strategic Planning Committee and we are recommending that certain areas of the city be designated as redevelopment zones where the city and its residents are committed together to implementing effective strategies to re-gentrify these areas. The remaining areas of the city, which represent by far the largest land-area, should be designated as protected neighborhoods and green space zones, where significant redevelopment, especially if it involves mass grading and clear-cutting, is not allowed. In the transitional spaces between new developments and the protected neighborhoods, developers should build large and heavily landscaped buffer zones and should provide ample green space which is available to all residents. We should also work closely with the Sandy Springs Conservancy and our City Parks Dept. to add more green space corridors, again as a way to buffer our neighborhoods from the commercial redevelopment zones.

**Parks, green space and recreation areas can enhance the lives of our citizens and/or increase our property values. Should more land for these purposes be acquired by the city? If so, how would it be funded?**

During my Board service with the Sandy Springs Conservancy, we used multiple funding sources for greenspace projects and our city can do the same. For the Lost Corner Park, 26 acres was acquired in a life estate by the Trust for Public Land, then later conveyed to the city and developed into a park. FEMA purchases flood-zone land with federal dollars and deeds those tracts to municipalities, which can then be developed into greenspace. Developers can and should include greenspace within their developments, such as the 14 acre park that Ashton Woods is donating to Sandy Springs as part of its new project. Large companies like those headquartered in Sandy Springs have charitable trusts that we can solicit for land-grant funding and greenspace development. Some city funding will be needed, but through a well-balanced use of public and private funds, we can develop greenspace without over-burdening our tax-payers.

**Hammond Drive has four lanes in some places and two lanes in others. What options would you recommend for easing the flow of traffic in the corridor?**

As our City Councilman, I will push for a transportation study specifically for the Hammond Drive corridor that brings citizens and city leaders together in a transparent effort to determine if widening Hammond Drive will have a positive or negative impact on our east/west traffic and what impact it will have on the Hammond Glen neighborhoods. We must also evaluate the Hammond/Roswell Road intersection to determine how we more efficiently move traffic through that corridor. There are short-term ways to improve flow like better-timed traffic lights, more "Do Not Block" boxes in front of neighborhoods and additional sidewalks to reduce

traffic speeds and improve personal safety. But, a comprehensive study by traffic management professionals coupled with a commitment by our citizens and our city to implement their recommendations will be required to execute permanent solutions to our traffic congestion, not just on Hammond Drive, but throughout Sandy Springs.

**Impact fees are paid by holders of building permits to provide resources for public upgrades in infrastructure such as roads, traffic upgrades, utilities, storm water runoff. What guidelines do you suggest for spending these funds - In the areas related to the permit? In the highest area of need in the city? Other criteria?**

I believe that re-energizing the aging areas of our city and finding permanent solutions to our traffic congestion are two issues that will have a profound impact on our quality of life across Sandy Springs. As noted earlier, our Next 10 Strategic Plan will likely recommend that certain areas of the city be designated as redevelopment zones, which are the areas of Sandy Springs that have the greatest need for re-gentrification. The other issue that we must address is transportation. Therefore, my recommendation is to dedicate our impact fees to these two important initiatives first through the implementation of projects that are specific to addressing these two key initiatives. Once we have satisfied these initiatives, if there is a funding surplus thereafter, we will evaluate other areas where these funds can be invested to improve our community.

**There is improved traffic flow on some of our heavily traveled north-south corridors, such as Roswell Rd. What efforts would you support to improve traffic in your district?**

Better traffic light management, more "Do Not Block" boxes at neighborhood entrances, more "No Cut-Through" designations for neighborhoods (supported by heavier policing and stiffer fines for violators) and the utilization of traffic management technology to warn drivers about traffic "hot spots" can all help in the short-term. Incentivizing companies to offer ride shares and/or work from home incentives for employees can also reduce commuter traffic. In our district, a Cobb-County feeder road from Johnson Ferry to Powers Ferry, thus keeping Cobb cars on Cobb's side of the river, is a must. For workers going into the Central Perimeter market, a local shuttle bus service operated by the city may be viable if there are enough interested riders to support it. There are many options to consider and I will push for a traffic management task force to be formed immediately to develop concrete solutions to address our congestion.

**Services**

**Sandy Springs has placed a high priority on public safety and we have outstanding services and programs. What can the city do to further reduce the crime and enhance safety and services?**

Sandy Springs has an outstanding team of public safety professionals and our first job as city leaders is to listen to them and provide them with the tools they need to protect our community. Creating attractive housing options for our first responders so they can live in Sandy Springs and have more community visibility and involvement can also be a positive deterrent for crime. As noted earlier, apartment complexes and extended stay motels must participate in the solution to crime reduction and those that do not vet their residences and allow high levels of criminal activity to occur on their properties should receive significant fines from the city that escalate with each repeat offense. Finally, working closely with our schools to help them provide at-risk students with a pathway to an education and a successful life will be the greatest asset in reducing the long-term crime rate in our city.

**Sandy Springs has high per capita and family incomes. Do you have a recommendation to add housing stock in more varied price points? How would you accomplish additional workforce housing?**

As redevelopment occurs, particularly on aging retail and apartment sites, by reducing or eliminating impact fees on “attainable” housing, we can incentivize builders to construct homes at affordable price points for middle-income residents. The city offers a housing supplement for police and fire, and I recommend that we expand this to other public servants like teachers and nurses. The Federal Home Loan Bank offers grant programs for a meaningful percentage of the buyer’s down payment, which can be a challenge for younger buyers with limited cash resources. As a community banker, I work with these grant programs and can help our public servants gain access to these funds. As our councilman, I will recommend that we offer property-specific tax reductions in addition to the existing supplements for public servants living in Sandy Springs to lower or eliminate their property taxes, thus reducing their cost of home ownership.