

Interview with Brady Banks
3/14/2007

Sean Braisted: I'm here with Brady Banks, who is running for at large metro council. So the first question I always start off with is, why did you choose at large instead of a district council race?

Brady Banks: Well, the thing is, is that actually I considered the possibility for district council, but of course I'm in the 24th, which is Sylvan Park, and if you don't live smack dab in the middle of all that overlay stuff, so I didn't really think I had a dog in that fight. That wasn't really the only reason; that was only part of the reason. Another reason was that I plan on getting married pretty soon, probably this year sometime, and I knew I was going to be moving into her home. So again, there is a problem there, but I knew I wanted to serve. Also, I was encouraged to go to Hermitage, which is where I grew up, but I didn't think that was going to be a genuine way to run about this. I really am concerned about Nashville as a whole, and we've talked about that, but really I'm kind of concerned about the larger problems facing Nashville; and I really want to look at what Nashville might look 40 years from now, rather than just smack dab in my little district right now.

SB: So you don't have any allegiance to one area really? You're more of a...

BB: I'd like to think that I have broad appeal. Again, we'll see if that is true or not. I think that in Hermitage, there will be some support there; Old Hickory and Donelson, I went to High School over there. Beyond that, who knows where the support is, we'll find out as far as a candidate, but we'll see.

SB: Your bio on your website said that you worked on a TN State Senate campaign. Who's campaign was that?

BB: Sen. Roy Herron out in Dresden. He's a pretty fun character to work with.

SB: Did you learn anything in that campaign that you think you can apply to this district-wide race?

BB: You know, I think in the end, that is probably where I cut my political teeth. I've worked on other campaigns before; most of them were National level. The Edwards stuff up in New Hampshire, but then also I had did some work for the Georgia folks back in 2002, which was a wildly successful [sarcasm noted] campaign for the Democrats in Georgia. But of course even that experience is all kind of focused; it was voter education, opponent research, that kind of stuff. And then knocking on doors and coordinating volunteers for Edwards up in New Hampshire. But coming down here, being in TN, and seeing how a campaign really comes together; that's what I saw with Sen. Herron. I got to learn about fundraising, about how to organize events, about who to go talk to and who not to go talk to, who to really spend time, and maybe who you don't need to spend much time with, to be very frank. Unfortunately, the electoral game is a

little bit of you have to be a realist, you know, where can you get support and not. So I think I learned how to pick and choose. For a candidate like me that's kind of an important thing because I'm not going to have everybody and their brother knowing exactly who I am. But I might be able to get some folks behind me.

SB: I find there are two different types of politicians; there are those who are populists in the sense that they'll vote however their constituents want...they'll get 51 calls in favor and 49 against, they'll vote in favor of it. And there are people who have sort of reasoning and logic behind everything they do. Do you think you are more of a principled variety or will you vote how your constituents wants regardless of whether you agree with them or not.

BB: I think personally I've got a philosophical bent, so I'm going into things mostly with, "this is how I think about it," but I don't mind asking the question, "how do you think about it." So I think I'm probably slightly more on the populist end of things. You know, growing up in Nashville, having known people not only in Hermitage, but also downtown where I live now, it gives you a perspective of what Nashville is made up of. There are some very distinct neighborhoods, distinct areas, different ideas about what we should be doing as a city. I think something I might be able to bring to the table is actually combining those two. I think I come at it from that direction: here is where I'm coming from, where are you coming from, and let's talk about it...that approach.

SB: Is there one political figure in history that you would like to emulate the most?

BB: I'd probably say I'm a big fan of FDR. The reason is, is the way I look at him and history is that he really focused on our problems, and found solutions. And that's kind of how I've honestly defined this race. I'm not somebody that is of a political or philosophical bent that is so extreme, that I'm not going to be able to say, "this works, and if this works, lets go with it." Because if it solves the problems that Nashville is facing, then lets do it. That's the way I'm looking at it, so I think FDR is somebody that I look at and say, "he did the same thing through the depression and through WWII and certainly with this country." I mean shoot, lots of recommendations on what to do with banking and housing and all those good things, so he's a pretty interesting character, I think.

SB: You earned a MDiv at Harvard University, so why choose to go the secular life instead of a more religious career path.

BB: There are a couple of things that happened. When I got up to Harvard, of course I was solely focused on ministry, I actually thought I was going to do some sort of foreign ministry. I got into a group of folks who were more oriented towards public policy, and the religion, and how those two mix in the public square. And I really got an interest in that. And the thing is that when I started studying those things I found myself gravitating towards the issues, particularly affordable housing, that is where I began to start thinking about affordable housing, at Harvard. So once I got up there I started to shift a little bit, but I also started to shift a little bit in the way I approached my faith. Of course I was no

longer Southern Baptist after about a year of being up there. And not necessarily because of anything that was going on at Harvard, but really just because of some personal things I was going through, in terms of figuring out exactly what I believe. Because of that I think I was thrown into a world of chaos because I figured out all of a sudden that I wasn't going to be a minister in the church setting. But that I did want to do some good, you know as my faith instructs... somehow, some way. And I thought certainly the public square was a good way to do that. You know, leadership in a local Government was certainly a way to do that, there are a number of ways to do that. This is just the one way I've chosen so far. Of course, you know the end of the story; I became an Episcopalian last year and got confirmed. Which is sort of funny for someone who thought he was going to be a minister to be confirmed in a church after he got out of divinity school, but that's kind of how it came together, and I really just got more concerned about the issues.

SB: When you were at Harvard, you authored a case study on Purcell's efforts to get affordable housing here in Nashville. While you are at the council, do you think that what he did is more of a base to work upon or do you think there are things that he didn't do that we should be focusing on at the council level.

BB: I think that what the council did do very well was say that "here is a problem and we need to figure out what the solution is, and here are our goals." Of course Chris Ferrel in 1999 was the guy who really brought up the affordable housing issue. He said that we need to add this many units in 10 years, otherwise we are not meeting the demand for our city. We've done a good job, especially through MDHA and through the office of affordable housing that the mayor set up, of really setting up partnerships that did produce affordable housing units.

Now I don't think we are done with that work. I think that its great that we might meet our goals, we might come up just a little bit short in terms of the numbers that were in that paper; but I really think that in the end, what we should do is the same thing over the next thing. And we don't have much of a choice because Nashville is going to grow, we are the hub in Tennessee, and starting to compete a little bit with Atlanta in terms of commerce coming our way, people moving our way. We are going to have to think about how we are going to address that kind of growth. And that is something that of course affects us for years to come. So I say we should continue to do what Purcell said, and what the President said, and that is we need to deal with this issue, but still push hard and continue to form those partnerships that are going to do this and that in terms of creating affordable housing units.

SB: Well you mentioned Atlanta, and there are quite a few large buildings there. And there was controversy when a councilman tried to zone a large Hotel in the Broadway area because some people thought this would mess up the Nashville landscape. Should we worry so much about preserving the Nashville landscape or should we worry more about growth?

BB: I think it's a careful balance, I don't think there is one way you need to go. Certainly lower Broad and Second Ave. has a certain character. A lot of our history is

tied into that area, so I don't think that you destroy that. But at the same time, the Westin is directly behind Lower Broad and second ave..I don't know if that's necessarily a bad thing. I think that is where the tourists are, and if we build the convention center in that area, again we're going to need hotel space. I'm all about attracting people here to Nashville so we can get the sales tax revenue that comes from those folks who come for conventions, who come for the tourist attractions; I'm all for making sure that we are taking care of our city. So if we can find a balance between getting those folks here, creating revenue for the city, but then also maintaining our character; that's what I would be for, and I think we can do that. I don't think the Westin really would destroy the character of Lower Broad.

SB: One thing about the Westin is that its going to be a green, LEED certified, building and there is an effort by some council members to make that mandatory for all Metro facilities. Would you support that?

BB: Absolutely, I think we're past the time of saying that buildings that we're responsible for as a local Government, shouldn't be built that way. It's clear that Nashville has some of the worst air quality in all of the United States, because that's the case we need to do everything we can, environmentally, to make sure that Nashville is a cleaner, healthier city. We have the health care community, and I've talked to you about this before, but we have the health care community that is centralized right here in Nashville, and we should be able to rally around that. I mean shoot, the reason I have such troubles with my allergies and my synases is probably because of the air quality. So I think we need to do those things, but then also conserving energy is good for commerce, it creates a little bit more of a margin, a little bit more revenue, and so it saves folks money and saves the city money. There are a number of positives involved, so I'd definitely be for it.

SB: With affordable housing...if Metro gives money to these buildings or helps fund these buildings, should it be a requirement too that they be LEED certified, or that they at least be environmentally sustainable.

BB: Do you mean the affordable housing developments? [*right*] I don't see why they couldn't. There is tons of funding out there from the Federal Government for projects like that, and I think the name of the game right now for Nashville is we need density downtown. So if we're going to have affordable housing, we're going to have density and we need to have environmentally sound buildings that meet the LEED requirements. Again, I can't imagine why we wouldn't at least try for that, given the amount of money that's going towards it right now. The popularity of the green building movement...I mean we're a progressive city, and we continue to progress.

SB: On the progressive front, last year Jim Gotto, and this sort of relates to housing to, he introduced legislation to make it a crime to rent property to an illegal alien. So what do you think of that bill in particular and in general all these bills designed to address illegal immigration on a Metro level.

BB: To be very frank, I don't think Nashville as a city needs to aggressively pursue illegal immigrants, in certain situations. Darron Hall has done the right thing, he's said look we've got a memo of understanding. We can arrest illegal immigrants here in Nashville, and of course file them out through the federal system; I think that's the way we address it.

It's a federal issue; the Federal government needs to give assistance to local governments. The English first bill, I'm going to touch on all these, the English first bill, honestly, I think its discrimination. Because it singles out people who are either legal or illegal, it doesn't single out people who are illegal immigrants. We have a very diverse group of folks who are moving to Nashville, and whether we like it or not, we need to be sure we accommodate those folks who are trying to learn English. For us to say as a Government that we're simply not going to work with you...I don't think does any good. So, there are a number of perspectives on that one, and there are a number of issues. Illegal Immigrants are here illegally, and we need to remove them if the Federal Gov't will give us that assistance, and give us that help, and if they're identified as such. But other than that we don't need to discriminate against people who are simply living here. That would be my approach to all those issues.

SB: I guess one of the supposed problems that comes with illegal immigrants is more crime. You've been a Nashville native most of your life...have you noticed that there has been more crime recently, less crime recently, do you feel that, regardless of the numbers, do you get a sense that its worse in Nashville now than it was 20 years ago?

BB: You know, to be completely straight with you, I wasn't very familiar with downtown 20 years ago. I was a kid out in Hermitage, and honestly Hermitage was almost countryside back then, of course its not now. I think with growth, anytime you've got growth like we've seen it, there's always going to be the question of, 'how do we keep the public safe? How do we keep our streets free from crime? I don't think that there is any evidence that we are on a huge up-tick in terms of crime, but I do think with growth there is always going to be that issue, and I think what we do is we beat it to the punch. That way we protect ourselves from any kind of increase that might occur down the road in the future. But no I don't think there has been a significant change in the amount of crimes per capita.

SB: What about crimes like vandalism and graffiti, because I've noticed that where I work there has been a lot more graffiti. Should metro deal more with that? Does that precipitate more crime by degrading the city?

BB: Well, it depends on where you are. If you're over in East Nashville, I mean heck that might actually add some flavor to the city. To be very honest, and I believe it was Giuliani who did that up in New York, it was some city, either Chicago or New York, where they said, "I'll let you have an artist permit, and if you can find a space to do that, we'll let you be a graffiti artist. That is one interesting approach to it. Now I don't necessarily think Nashville is in that state where it is such a rampant issue...but I don't think the brunt of our resources need to go towards that, I think really the biggest thing

we are facing right now is anti-gangs, and how can we stop those. Also, anti-drug, because really those are the roots of a lot of the crime that happens in Nashville beyond petty crime; those are kind of the big issues.

SB: You mentioned drugs, and I'm wondering, should the city's efforts be geared more towards serious drugs, like Cocaine and Meth, should we maybe focus less on things such as Marijuana?

BB: Drugs are illegal until they are deemed legal. So, I think we should focus on...the hard drugs of course are something we should really eliminate, of course simple possession of marijuana is something that will be a little harder to track down, because it is such an easily accessible drug. I think its easy to get rid of Cocaine; Meth, of course the state has been locking down on that, those drugs are a little bit easier to track down. You know, people that get their simple possessions, I don't know if they should spend more resources trying to knock out weed. But I still think that it's an illegal drug, and if someone is caught with it, they should get charged. If there is a big outlet for weed, we should knock those out too. Of course then we'll let the Federal and State Government decide what they want to decide in terms of its legality.

SB: One of the issues that is facing the council...S-Town Mike, from Salemntown, he's been very critical of a program where council members get 50K to pretty much allocate however they want, and much of it goes to private charity. Do you think that program should stay as it is?

BB: I think Nashville has got a revenue problem, and with the reform of our property tax, basically saying that we are not going to raise property taxes without the population's say-so...that ties our hands in terms of funding. With that I think we've got to be a lot more responsible with the funding we do have and 50K might be a little bit much, I understand the importance of that money going to private charities or non-profits, in specific districts, but our job as council members, if I'm lucky enough to be on there, our job is to be responsible with the money we've got. I would say count the amount of money given to council members for that reason. Just because we need to be more responsible with the money, and spend it where it really needs to be spent. If we have a problem that is not getting enough funding, why are we still continuing that program where we give 50K? Ultimately those organizations are private organizations, and they are responsible for raising their funds. The work they do is very important, but at the same time, we are strapped for cash.

SB: One of the chief criticisms about that is that much of that money is going towards faith-based, religious charities. Should Nashville be involved in funding or helping to fund these things? Or should we remain separate, or should there be a balance?

BB: I like to say partnership. I think we bolster any groups that are productive. If you look at 15th Ave CDC for example, you'll see that they've produced a number of homes in the North Nashville area. They've been very instrumental in that kind of development. We help those folks. And its not necessarily because they are faith-based, or because

they are secular, its because they are productive. Same thing with a number of other CDCs around town. If there is a program that works, and its doing its job better than metro government can do it; we should partner with those folks and use them as a solution. Now of course, outright proselytizing, I'm not really into that. But I think partnerships are a good way to go about it.

SB: You mentioned in your paper on affordable housing the religious organizations involved there. Should they be doing more to help provide affordable housing for Nashville? Irrespective of the Metro Government.

BB: My personal opinion is that I think they have the capability to. But, affordable housing is a hard issue to really get people to first off get people to put their minds around, and to get people to act on. People just don't want to spend the time on it, or they don't think they have the expertise to really get it going. But as Louise McClellan would tell you is all you have to do is go and pray and the go out and do what you think you're supposed to do. And I think they'll find there is a lot they can do. I don't think its primarily the non-profit or faith-based organizations' responsibility. I really do think that Metro Nashville has an obligation to its people to start seeking out solutions on that issue. And then, partner with people who are productive, in terms of affordable housing. You know, whether its domestic violence issues or any number of things, we help those folks out if they are doing a good job.

SB: What do you think you can do as a council member to improve Nashville's education system, because a lot of that is covered by the School Board?

BB: And the thing is, that is a relationship that has to be managed. I think that what you do is you say, we've got these resources and we've got Peabody down the street, we've got Metro council who wants to do good with public education, we've got the Nashville COC who is certainly working in their way...there are really interesting options in terms of alternative ways to educate our kids. The Lead academy, Kipp, those are good examples.

I think honestly what we need to do; we are at a point, and I don't know of y'all know this, but Nashville was the first school system in the South. And I think that shows that Nashville at point was an innovator in education, and I don't see why we can't do that again. I think we are cusp of having to make a real good plan for our education system . I think what we need to do is we need to reconsider ideas, practices, and concepts that we might take with us for the long term, and really put those into practice. I think we need to explore those options, besides just saying, "more funding for public education," which is an obvious answer, to put more money into it. Let's start really looking at what we might do that would be an innovation in terms of education.

SB: What do you think of Nashville's Magnet school program, is this something that we need to expand or improve it?

BB: I would like to see more schools like your MLKs or your Hume Foggs; you know I'm sure exactly how that would work out, to be very frank, also I believe in the Tip concepts...taking those kids who are most in need and putting them in an environment where they actually do learn. Again, its not products, if there is a problem, we need a solution, and if the solution works, go with it. If we find that Lead is very successful, we go with it. If we find that Kip is very successful, we go with it. If our Magnet school system continues to be successful as it has be, go with it, and see if we can expand on it.

SB: When you went to school here, did you apply to Hume or MLK?

BB: You know, I was scared to death I was going to be the dummy in the class [laugh]. No, actually most of my buddies stayed at regular, not magnet schools, and that's where I preferred to be. At McGavock we had every AP class you could imagine. There was nothing that I was going to miss out on if I didn't choose to goto a magnet school. So I don't figure that going to that school was going to hurt me. You can get a good education in the regular public schools, its just that you have to have lots of good parents and teachers...you have to have a great support net. You have to have people telling you what to do and how to do it along the way.

SB: What about vouchers, because I've heard a lot of people talk about "choice", with ideas like having same-sex schools, or have uniforms; but there is one choice that metro government can't provide, and that is a faith-based education. Is there any possibility for some tax incentives for people who go to private school? Or should Metro be completely focused on Public.

BB: I think that our biggest issue right now is dealing with the public schools. I don't think that's the answer, honestly, I that's peanuts. That's a very small answer to the problem. We know that our schools need to be better, and I think everybody can agree on that universally, I don't think that the answer is, "lets send 'em out to Father Ryan." Even though Father Ryan is a great school, we don't need to provide funding to Father Ryan. Indirectly or directly; again, its private vs public, and our responsibility is to the schools we have. And to any innovation that might come out of the schools we have, or the people we are in conversations with in terms of improving public education. In terms of funding directly or indirectly private institutions, I don't think we need to do that.

SB: I guess I'm finished with all the questions I had, are there subjects that we didn't get to touch on that your campaign is going to be focusing on?

BB: I think we actually did it all. I mean we got Environment, Public Safety, Education, Affordable Housing...I could talk to you forever about that. Transportation is another big one that I don't we covered.

SB: No, and on your website, you mentioned that you think we might need a light-rail system in Nashville.

BB: Yeah, and I think the idea behind that one is that we should put that idea out there and see what happens. If you've ever been on West End after 4 o'clock on a weekday, you know what the condition is, and we have density issues with condos going up over there. There is going to be a bit of a problem with traffic. Honestly, what Nashville needs is something to run straight down West End, all the way down to the railroad, maybe even down to the river and into a little bit of East Nashville. That will relieve some of that congestion. And then we might look at other corridors that are key in terms of transportation but are also congested and see if we might do the same thing. And run it perpendicular to that line. Again, this is all about making Nashville a good city, and controlling the growth.

The plan of Nashville has recommended the same kind of concepts where we have very little traffic downtown, lots of green areas, nicely lined roads with trees, and a light rail system might offer that kind of possibility. I think its something we should explore, and I don't know if anybody's mentioned that, but I think its something we need to look at. To be very frank, I don't think Music City Star is necessarily the answer to all of our public transportation woes. Which a lot of people think is a big step. [Sean: right, because they go to the outer areas of Nashville] Right, and what I'm talking about is very localized. Of course we can always have spokes that go out to Lebanon.

SB: Should it service all of Davidson County or just downtown?

BB: I think that what they've proposed with the Music City Star and they plan on expanding that service into outer lying suburbs. I think it can work in conjunction with the light rail, but what I'm talking about it solely downtown. The first issue is, we've got to care about Davidson County...that's our first concern. The primary issue down there is congestion downtown with traffic. So lets clean that up first, and see how that works, and if we find its successful then lets broaden our approach to it.

SB: What about, and this is all sort of hypothetical, but something like a trolley system like they had in San Fran. That would be more for pedestrian traffic and...

BB: That would be an interesting approach. We did have the Motor Trolleys a couple years back, and those were wildly successful. But I think that a very solid line so that they aren't just randomly driving downtown and again its about service. Is it timely, do you know where it is, is it expensive? All those things come into play, and honestly I don't think you can rely on the trolley system for much in terms of timeliness. And costs, I don't really remember what the cost was but just something to drag.

SB: And I guess that is an example of something that was tried and failed. Is there a concern that you spend all this money on a light rail system only to figure out that people want to drive a car. They don't have any desire to sit with people they don't know on a public transportation system.

BB: Well, that's a possibility, but you're always setting yourself up for that when you try something new. But I think there are some calculated risks you can take. Its very clear

that there is congestion on West End going into town. I think, given the density that is going up around that, I think it would be a fairly good risk to take, saying this is a line that I'm fairly certain will work out, in terms of cost, but also in terms of use. And then also in terms of service and the way it develops our city.

SB: So should anything we do with our public transportation system be "green" or environmentally sustainable?

BB: I think that is something we always strive for. Anytime the city is doing anything that has to do with development, we have to consider ways we can be more environmentally conscious with what we're doing. That goes for buildings, general development, transportation issues. Hell, if we can get 'em running on ethanol, of course I don't know how cost-efficient that is, but you know, if that works then let's do that, if that's the best way. I think we explore our options because we've got the opportunity right now, before we become a very large city, to prepare ourselves for that. Of course we do anything we can to make it safer or better.

SB: Speaking of becoming a bigger city and attracting new people... cities like San Fran and Mountain View out in California are experimenting with municipal broadband or municipal wifi networks so that everyone outside or inside is covered by wifi. Is that something Nashville can do to attract younger workers?

BB: Oh yeah, well any city now, we know there is a trend that any city which is technically savvy, that's dealing with computers, that's dealing with the Internet resources; they're just going to be a better city for it. It helps not only education, but it helps communication, it helps connectivity in the city, there is no good reason why we shouldn't pursue that. Now, the question always becomes money, you know how do we fund something like that? And there is a multitude of options there too. So there is no real set answer...but we should pursue it, explore it, and see what we can come up with. It's a great idea and something we may not be able to do feasibly right now, but definitely something we should do in the future.

SB: I think that's about it, so Brady I want to thank you for coming out and talking with me.

BB: Its been fun Sean.