**CHALT 2021 Endorsements for Chapel Hill Mayor and Town Council**

CHALT announces the endorsement of Hongbin Gu for Chapel Hill Mayor, and Adam Searing and Vimala Rajendran for Chapel Hill Town Council.

Since 2015, CHALT has endorsed candidates for Chapel Hill Mayor & Council, as well as for Orange County Board of Commissioners. Of the 20 candidates we endorsed, 16 were elected (80%). We have strived to make our selection process transparent and inclusive. Because of Covid this year, we needed to move much of the interview and selection process online, but it is largely the same as in previous years. CHALT is a large organization with a wide diversity of opinions, which makes the process lengthy.

* All candidates were invited to participated
* Interview questions were developed by the group and were given to the candidates beforehand
* We have published the questions for the public to see
* Video recordings of the interviews were publicly posted in their entirety (with the candidate's permission)
* We invited close to one hundred people to participate in the two-day selection event (approximately 25 people attended in-person & several others sent in written comments)
* We brought in a trained facilitator to run the meeting to ensure that everyone would be able to speak without any strong voices dominating.
* We set a 2/3's minimum for any endorsement (all decisions were actually made with more than 90% agreement)

The group of candidates for Town Council were particularly green this year. With the exception of Karen, who is an incumbent, and Adam, who has served as chair of Carrboro’s Planning Commission, none of the other candidates for Town Council had any significant expertise in municipal government. Most of the time for the council is spent on land use planning, and so we would recommend that anyone considering a run for Town Council or Mayor would first serve on one of the primary planning review boards (Planning Commission, CDC, Housing Advisory), or the regulatory boards (Historic District, Board of Adjustment).

Covid prevented many of the CHALT members from being able to spend the usual amount of time getting to know new candidates at forums and events, which in previous years were plentiful. Because we are consensus driven, we often don't endorse for every open position, but only endorsing two candidates for the Town Council is unusual for us. Requiring a 2/3's minimum agreement for endorsement may have led us to overlook some candidates simply because a 45-minute interview, by itself, was insufficient for some members to offset their concerns over the candidate's inexperience.

*Attached is a short description of our thoughts and discussion on each candidate.*

**CHALT 2021 Review of Chapel Hill Mayor Candidates**

**Pam Hemminger.** Mayor Hemminger is running for her fourth term as Mayor of Chapel Hill. Pam is risk-adverse to addressing the most fundamental problems facing the town. Examples begin with not revising the form-based code early on (attempts to increase commercial resulted in a scant 10%), followed by the absence of leadership to control the frenzy of apartment projects spurred by outside developers.

More recently, a new form of project review methods allows routine departures from our Land Use Ordinances that require the Mayor and Council to exercise even stronger leadership and negotiation skills.  Without it, many projects were approved with insufficient attention to traffic congestion, flooding impacts, and to tree canopy, and impervious surfaces.

As Mayor, she also oversaw significant cost overruns for the problematic Elliott Road Extension from 2.5 million to 6 million, and the Rosemary Parking Deck from 20 to 40 million while failing to secure—and communicate—accurate and complete updates on the costs of services. In addition, our repeated calls for more permanently affordable for sale townhomes, and condos for essential workers, the missing middle and the poor were ignored—which were sternly reinforced by the Stevens housing report.

In our view, Pam’s most noteworthy achievements came early in her first term where she

rescued the Legion Park from development, and founded the summer program for feeding kids.

She is also to be commended for coordinating well with partners at UNC and the County to guide us through the pandemic.

**Hongbin Gu**. CHALT supported Hongbin when she ran for Town council in 2017. She ran a successful

campaign and became the first Asian American to serve on the Chapel Hill Town Council. In the

process, Hongbin helped integrate Chapel Hill’s large and rapidly growing Asian community into the

mainstream political process. If Hongbin is successful in her run for Mayor, she will continue to help foster inclusivity and Chapel Hill will record another historic first.

As a Town Council member, Hongbin has been a pleasant surprise. We knew that she was analytical and

would be data-driven, but we had no idea how motivated and tenacious she would become. In most

cases, she is the most prepared and well-researched member on the dais. In almost every project (not

just the high-profile projects), she has walked the site, driven the streets, spoken with the neighbors,

and solicited advice from a diverse group of experts.

Mayor Hemminger and Dr. Gu approach problems from different directions. Pam is risk-adverse, while Hongbin is a risk-taker. Hongbin is driven to make things happen, and over the last two years, both Hongbin and CHALT have grown increasingly disillusioned with Pan’s leadership and her inability to make progress on the problems its residents identify as most important.

Making the transition from Council member to Mayor requires employing a different set of leadership

skills. The organizational breadth and strengths of Hongbin’s campaign demonstrates that she possesses those skills. In 2017, she energized communities previously less engaged in American politics. In her 2021 run, she has combined voices from the new and marginalized communities with community members that have long time active members. This shows unique leadership.  We agree with Hongbin’s community-focused vision for building Chapel Hill’s future. Of all of the candidates we have supported since 2015, we believe Hongbin aligns most with our core priorities.

**Zachary Boyce.** Zachary Boyce is a second-year law student at UNC-Chapel Hill. He is also pursuing a

master’s degree in Information and Library Science. CHALT applauds his interest in public service, his

energy, and his desire to “center the voices of those who have not been centered” in town government.

We also share his interest in using “evidence-based best practices” in Chapel Hill policy and governance, and his call for town leaders to make greater use of the expertise available right here at UNC is good advice. However, Mr. Boyce does not demonstrate knowledge of the specific public challenges Chapel Hill currently faces. We are disappointed that Mr. Boyce has not expressed policy positions on such key local issues as affordable housing, economic development, and environmental protection. We hope he will pursue his public service interest by volunteering for town boards or commissions or otherwise gain

practical knowledge and experience in town governance.

**Karen Stegman.** Karen Stegman was endorsed by CHALT in 2017 as a Chapel Hill native whose platform included strong support for the environment. We had hoped that she would bring a unique appreciation of how permit conditions related to parking, traffic and stormwater can improve our environment and livability. In this new era of conditional zoning, council members are required to exercise tough negotiating skills to stand up to the intensive big money pressures all towns and cities are experiencing. However, Karen has been the council member least likely to ask for meaningful concessions from developers.

Adam Searing. Adam Searing is a Chapel Hill native who understands the town and has a stake in its future. He has been a leading voice on healthcare reform and has advocated for the uninsured and the underserved before the General Assembly providing him experience valuable legislative experience for the Town Council. He has also been active in local issues, as the Chair of the Carrboro Planning Board. He is articulate, and thoughtful and has the skills to advocate for the right type of development, to champion our local businesses, to push for much needed affordable housing, and to insist on the right mix of commercial businesses. Adam will advocate for our parks, green space, and connectivity, which we found to be so important during the pandemic. He is a true environmentalist, who can add balance to the Council and provide leadership.

Additionally, Adam is approachable, likeable, and has shown that he will listen to community members.

Throughout the campaign, he has thoroughly researched issues, and we are confident that would be as asset to Chapel Hill’s Town Council. His priorities for the town align with CHALT’s priorities.

**Vimala Rajendran.** Vimala Rajendran could have won her way into our hearts with her award-winning cooking, but it is her

long record of support for, and work with, a wide range of good causes and groups that got CHALT’s attention.  As a local business owner, she is especially aware of how town development policies can work to the detriment of established enterprises.  As an immigrant herself, she understands the needs of new residents, especially relating to employment and joining the community. newly arrived people for work and integration into our social circles.  Now she proposes to use her contacts and energies to maintain what is special about Chapel Hill’s character, and expand political participation, while addressing our very real housing and environmental challenges.  She has no illusions about the difficulty of the work ahead but given the breadth of her support, she may bring a unifying influence to a largely divided Council that needs it. She is aligned with CHALT priorities.

**Paris Miller-Foushee.** Paris Miller-Foushee is sensitive to challenges facing traditionally under-served people in the area and is an experienced advocate for affordable housing. Paris is Vice-chair of the Policing Advisory Committee, a critical Chapel Hill body for the promotion of equity and social justice. While we were able to meet with other candidates’ multiple times, and gain a much broader picture of who they were and where they stood on issues that were important. The only time Paris made herself available was the official 45-minute Zoom interview. A key part of Town Council duties includes building bridges between communities and the largest part of that is being accessible.

**Camille Berry.** Camille Berry‘s lived experience with working class issues, commendable history of public service, and sensitivity to the need for affordable housing would make her a voice for underserved members of our community. CHALT members have found her very pleasant, connects well with a wide group of people and we believe she has the potential to build bridges with a variety of communities.

Although well- intentioned, Berry is unaware of how the complexities involved in translating her goals into finished products. She is unfamiliar with the multi-faceted issues surrounding land use planning and has limited knowledge of the growth trends, and economic challenges Chapel Hill will be facing.

The experience of serving on a Town advisory board would provide her with practical experience and provide the town with input from often marginalized voices. Combined with her lack of experience, her willingness to accept campaign donations from developers led many of our members to be unwilling to endorse Berry. She is not aligned with CHALT priorities.

**Robert Beasley**. Robert learned about, and understood, complex local zoning and development issues. His willingness to analyze the data, documents, and other materials (such as the Stevens Report on housing needs) demonstrated his ability to develop well thought out positions on the Town’s challenges.

He is a creative thinker who brings a unique perspective to problem-solving. Having worked for a large

bureaucratic IT company, his understanding of process methodology, focused on defining requirements

and goals, could reduce council delays, increase productivity, and result in better outcomes.

An advocate for the environment Beasley advocates for the protection of town lands designated for preservation and he supports a balanced use of town assets, that includes permanently affordable mixed income for sale and rental housing.

Beasley has called for the council to communicate with residents in a more open and timely manner, and to respect the input of residents in the decision-making process. Although he has much to recommend him as a councilperson, we are concerned by his lack of experience given that he is new to town politics and the mechanics of government. He is aligned with CHALT priorities.

**Jeffery Hoagland.** Jeffery Hoagland focuses his campaign on strengthening local businesses in downtown Chapel Hill. CHALT agrees that local business strength and growth is important. However, Mr. Hoagland’s concerns appear to focus on lowering the cost of parking downtown. We see economic development as a much more complicated issue. We were also disappointed that Mr. Hoagland, when invited to do so, did not express views on housing or environmental policy which CHALT sees as vital public issues in Chapel Hill. We also note that he apparently has no experience in government, community or civic organizations.