

AllOnGeorgia

Candidate Questionnaire -- Mayor/City Council (Brooklet)

NAME: Charles 'Charlie' Howell

POST: Mayor

1. What are some of the features/qualities that make Brooklet great and led you to call the city 'home'?

Brooklet truly has the small town/home town feel to it. The homes are well maintained, the pace is slow and easy, and there's just a certain feeling of peace and pleasantness when you walk down the street. You can wave at people passing in cars, and they wave back. Folks speak to you at the IGA, asking about your family - and they are sincere! This friendliness is the result of a great belief in the basic goodness of your fellow man. Even first time visitors feel this.

2. What do you believe are the biggest issues facing the City of Brooklet? How do you plan to address them?

Right now, I believe the biggest issue facing the City is a lack of faith in the local government. People tell me all the time that they don't understand what the Council is doing. They go to meetings and ask questions, but the council won't answer, or the answer is just 'fluff' to get past the question. I'm sure the current Council members will say that people usually don't go to the meetings and very few people ask questions. That's probably right, but other than reading reports, what does the Council offer? When EVERYONE knows there's an issue facing Council, they attend the meeting to hear what's happening and how it will be resolved. More often than not, the Council won't raise the issue in public, or won't discuss the issue if it is raised. Then, the Council goes into 'executive session' for extended periods. I understand the purpose of 'executive session,' but I suspect there is a LOT more discussed behind that closed door than is supposed to be. If elected Mayor, I plan to lead meetings that are more interactive with the town's citizens. I will answer their questions as forthrightly as possible. If we (the Council) have messed up, I will say so. If there are unsubstantiated rumors, I will address them and do my best to dispel them.

Another issue in the current Council is the constant bickering and in-fighting. I don't need to discuss or explain what we all see. As Mayor, I will simply not tolerate that behavior. The Council members are all adults. They (We, I hope) should behave accordingly.

Lastly, I think we are seeing some of the town's infrastructure (water, streets, etc) show signs of age and impending failure. I think the current Council has addressed some of this, but I'm not sure they have addressed enough of it. Recently the Council has moved toward giving huge incentives to developers while actually voting to raise water rates on the citizens. I don't believe in raising fees and taxes on our own citizen while giving away fees and not requiring developers

to develop subdivisions to standard. The Council needs to focus on the good of the community, not constantly dealing with self-created problems and situations.

3. If elected, what three steps would you take to put Brooklet on a firmer financial footing?

If elected Mayor, the first thing that I would do is get a better understanding of what our 'financial footing' actually is. I don't think anyone really knows or understands what monies the town has available in what accounts, or what expenditures we have, or what our sources of income are. I have experience in (Federal) government budget and accounting, and even I have difficulty following the conversation. At this point, I would not offer any steps to improve a situation I do not (YET) fully understand.

Having said that, the three basic steps to a firmer financial footing for the City are the same as improving the financial footing of a household budget – 1) Understand your obligations (bills), 2) Understand your funding (income), and 3) Ensure that 1 is less than 2.

4. If you received a \$1 million grant to use for the city in any way you wanted, what would you do with it and why?

I would sit down with the Council and ask each department head what the needs of their department are. The Mayor and Council are the elected leader of the City, but they may NOT be in the best position to assess the most pressing needs. I would listen to the dept. heads, I would ask questions, and require that they justify their expenditures. For example, everyone sees new police cars and thinks that is wasted money, but it is hard on a vehicle to run 12-14 hours per day at low speed or idle. On the other hand, I would not support getting a new police car just to buy a NEW police car. What about body armor vests? What are the needs of the streets and maintenance guys? Administration? What does the City have/need for emergency operations?

I would try to balance the current City needs against the needs to improve the infrastructure. I strongly suspect that the water system in the center of the city is severely degrade. Several people have told me that the water coming from the spigots in their home is very suspect. I think the City needs to understand exactly what the citizens are concerned about and be prepared to address their concerns.

5. Brooklet has dealt with some contention amongst residents over whether or not the city should annex in more property and/or absorb the responsibility for maintaining the streets in subdivisions. What types of things would you take into consideration when weighing decisions such as these and how would you make sure the best interests of the city are at the forefront?

This is a multi-part question dealing with related issues. I'll take the 'responsibility for maintaining the streets in subdivisions' first. The point of contention is the city assuming responsibility for the streets in the Sugarland subdivision. The development has a checkered history, but here are some immutable facts – 1) the subdivision is nearly complete/built out, 2) the paved streets have issues, 3) there are drainage issues for some homeowners, and 4) the subdivision is clearly within the city limits. I think the City has an obligation to assume responsibility for the street and drainage, BUT the developers have a responsibility to hand over

a development mostly free from defects. Trapped in the middle are residents paying for a municipal standard (acceptable streets and drainage) that they are not receiving. This is another issue that I would want to have more concrete information on, but my goal on this issue would be a compromise to get the streets under the City while requiring the streets to be brought closer to an acceptable condition. Understand that my definition of a compromise is where both sides give up something to get something else. No one is happy with it, no one likes it, but all the parties can live with it and move forward. What that compromise might be... I don't know yet. But the issue can be resolved.

The second part of the question concerns potential annexation of surrounding developments into the City limits. This was actually one of my platform ideas when I ran for City Council in 2005. I am still very much in favor of positive development and annexation of property into Brooklet, but NOT at the expense or on the backs of our current residents. A recent example of this concerns two new developments on Old Brooklet-Leefield Rd. I am the current chairman of the Brooklet Planning and Zoning (P&Z) Board. A request was sent to the P&Z to approve the annexation of the developments into Brooklet. I thought the basic idea was very sound and a benefit to the town, BUT the entire annexation process was handled improperly by City officials outside the P&Z Board. The April 2019 meeting was very contentious, as was the April and May City Council meetings. However, the City attorney concurred with the P&Z position that the process was not handled properly. Additionally, several ordinance changes were proposed to waive certain development fees and requirements in order to 'provide incentives' for development. The entire P&Z board flatly rejected each of these changes. Why? Because the changes would have cost the City tens, if not hundreds of thousands of dollars, in lost revenue or out-of-pocket expenditures. And I ask, "To do what? Provide an incentive for developers?" Folks, Brooklet is a desired location – people WANT to move here!! We should encourage development, but I don't think the City needs to offer 'incentives' that would cost the City money. Some folks would argue that those subdivisions will increase the tax base. I agree that they will, but not for years. In the meantime, we would be adding to our water system, paying out of our municipal pocket for water meters at houses that would have been built and would have sold quickly anyway. And lastly, how does the current City Council explain spending \$30,000 (the cost of water meters for the proposed subdivisions) and not collecting over \$16,000 as an 'incentive' to developers, while raising the water rates and still charging a water capital improvement fee to citizens each and every month on their water bill? THAT is the kind of situation I hope to avoid!

Bottom line = the City government should encourage development, but not at the expense of its current citizens.

6. Describe what a police department in a city the size of Brooklet should look like and what its primary functions should be.

First, let me say that if elected Mayor, I would sit down with the Chief and the officers to get a better understanding of ALL that they do and their thoughts on how that process might be better managed. I believe it is a hallmark of good leadership to talk to the people affected, understand the issues they face, and involve them (to some extent) in the decision making process.

Having said that, I feel that the best size for the Brooklet Police Dept might be 5-6 full time officers and 2-3 part time officers. Addressing the full time officers first, the Chief would be primarily day shift and would split his time between admin and patrol functions. The other 4-5 full time officers would be split between day and night shift, affording a manageable schedule of time on/time off. The part time officers would be used to augment the force for vacations, sick time, training etc. I think too many more full or part officers would be too many and the City would be adding unnecessary costs to the payroll. 1-2 fewer officers would mean that the officers hired would have very limited time off, and the time off they had might very well be consumed by training, court, covering other shifts etc. Continuous, never ending shifts with no rest between them is very disheartening to any work force, and usually leads to higher payroll costs, higher turnover, higher training costs, and declining moral. We have seen quite a bit of turnover lately and I feel that needs to stop. We need a stable police force – one that can build trust with the public and be familiar with the threats facing our community.

The primary functions of any police force are to provide for public safety and uphold the law. Brooklet is not a crime-ridden metropolis, but we do have a few instances of serious crime and necessary arrests. I think the bulk of their time should be directed toward public safety – checking on the elderly, other welfare checks, monitoring traffic (though we should NOT be a speed trap), and developing positive relations with the community. Our PD has been through A LOT in the last few years. I think we need to get back to basics.

7. a) How do you plan to involve residents in the decision making process in Brooklet? b) How can the city be more transparent?

That is actually a tougher question than it appears to be. Based on my education and first-hand experience, I feel that most (75-80%) Americans really do not want to be involved in government. We enjoy our freedoms, and we certainly CAN become VERY involved, but for the most part I believe most citizens want their elected officials to do the right thing without being told to do the right thing. The usual result of this is City Council meetings that are very sparsely attended. Now, if something is controversial or involves some massive change, then yes, the population will show up. So, how do we engage the citizens to be involved? I'm not exactly sure. That may not be the best political answer, but it is the truth. I know there are people who want to be involved in the City's government. I would want to involve them in 'meaningful' work. There may be opportunities with Planning and Zoning, or perhaps some grant-writing. I also know that many things people 'want' to be involved in are 'governmental by nature' and not appropriate for non-government people to work or be involved in. I think this would certainly be a challenging area. Maybe the best way to start it is to ask people what THEY want to be involved in.

The second part of this question is much easier. The City needs to be more forthcoming with information. I understand the need for holding some information private – personnel actions, pending litigation, etc. But other information does not need to be held so closely. Each Council meeting, there is a verbal statement of varying account balances, but precious little about what income, or more importantly what expenditures were made from each account. Why not print that out for meeting attendees to read, keep, and compare. Currently, our City does a poor job with meeting notifications. I don't know all the reasons why that is, but it is one thing I WILL work to improve. Another transparency issue involves the Council Meeting Agenda. The Council

members have a full month to prepare for the meeting, and yet there always seems to be a last minute agenda revision. Why? I understand that situations evolve and there might be an occasional agenda revision, but they seem (to me) to happen a lot. Lastly, I would have copies of the minutes available for residents to read.

One additional thing about how the City Council can be more transparent – talk to people. On several occasions, I have been told that ‘someone’ instructed the Council member to NOT discuss an issue with a citizen. Why? Why would an elected official NOT discuss an issue with a citizen? Fear of mis-speaking? Fear of litigation? Well, how in the world did we get to the point of potential litigation? I think we all – citizens and government officials alike – need to dial things back A LOT and just get back to talking to each other to resolve issues. We can disagree without resorting to legal action. We can compromise on things and move forward. Life is not always a win/lose proposition. Sometimes, it is a win/win, and more often it is a negotiated position between what people want and what they can live with.

8. Do you plan to stay involved in city activities if you lose this race?

As I stated earlier, I am currently the Chairman of the P&Z Board. If I win, I will have to resign. If I lose the election, the new mayor and council may choose to replace me on P&Z. Regardless, I will involve myself in issues that I think warrant my attention and input.

9. Why do you feel like you’re the best candidate for the job?

I feel that I would be the best person for the job because right now I feel that our city government is in disarray. I’m not going to point fingers and assign blame, but I think if we are honest with ourselves, that is a fair assessment. My first priority will be to re-establish order and civility to the Council, to the way the Council conducts business, and the way it deals with citizens. I am a fair minded person and I hate conflict, but I can establish order and civility.

Secondly, there are a lot of complicated issues facing out town. Expansion, annexation, SPLOST funds, water usage, etc. I have over 34 years of experience working for the Federal government. I have worked in budget (handling millions of dollars), Logistics, a little law enforcement, but through it all, I have been a leader. I have been assigned some very complex tasks, and I have accomplished them. I have been sent on short notice to ‘fix’ things that have gotten out of control.

Lastly, and most importantly, I have leadership experience in handling real world situations. I have been tasked to resolve situations that have already gone bad. Read that again – I have been assigned to situations that have already gone bad. I am a fixer – not the bad kind, but a person who can and will salvage a bad situation if at all possible. In most of those cases, I molded a team, emphasizing that we use our various expertise and play to our strengths, then we worked our way back to the best recovery possible. Let me emphasize that I ‘molded a team’ and ‘WE’ worked it out together. Many of my leadership positions have been with volunteer or service organization where the ‘leader’ has no real authority to command or direct others. I have had to develop other techniques to build my teams and get them to work toward a common goal. As I mentioned earlier, I feel our City Council is in disarray, and I feel that the City’s citizens have little confidence in our Council. I am offering to resolve that – to bring order and effectiveness

back to our City government AND to restore our citizen's confidence that City government is working in their best interests.

Please feel free to include any additional biographical information below. (Family information, history in City of Brooklet, employment, etc)

I am a retired veteran of the US Air Force and the Georgia Air National Guard. While in the service I attended several non-commissioned officer (NCO) Leadership Schools and Academies, and graduated at the top of my class each time. Additionally, while serving on Active Duty, I attended Georgia Southern University, earning a Bachelor's Degree with a 4.0 GPA while caring for my parents and raising 3 children. I currently work for the US Army as a Civil Service employee at Ft Stewart. I am part of the Operations Cell (S3) in the Army Field Support Battalion, heavily involved in taskings (mission assignments) and disaster response. I have additional experience in Budgeting/Accounting, Quality Assurance, Data Analysis, and as an aircraft mechanic. I have turned wrenches and briefed generals – I am equally comfortable in either situation.

I am a Christian with a broad background of belief. I was baptized an Episcopalian, but confirmed as a Lutheran. I attended a Catholic high school and had Jewish friends. I married a Baptist, and we first became Presbyterians, but now we are Methodists. I tell this with a smile, but it is the verifiable truth. It is also an indication of my ability to work with many people who have different ideas about things that are very important to all of us. I will do the right thing, or always fight to do the right thing – and I am rarely in doubt about what the 'right thing' is. What I offer, to any who will listen, is the ability to speak to everyone with a common language of what is important and how WE can get there - together.

I am a 25 year Master Mason and a Past Master of Thunderbolt Lodge #693. Additionally, I am a York Rite Mason. I am also member of the Brooklet Kiwanis Club. I am a past president of the Southeast Bulloch High School Band Booster club (4 times president), and consider that time to be some of the hardest – and most rewarding – of my leadership experience. I have coached rec department football, baseball, and soccer, which has also contributed to my leadership experience in ways that are hard to quantify in words.

My wife and I are originally from Savannah, but we have lived in Stilson/Brooklet since 1991. I have been married to Angela 'Angie' Howell for 35 years. We have three children who have attended Brooklet Elementary, Southeast Bulloch Middle, and Southeast Bulloch High schools. Our youngest is still attending SEB High. The older children both graduated from Georgia Southern. We are from southeast Georgia and we are rooted in southeast Georgia. I understand the culture, expectations, customs and courtesies of the area. I also understand the opportunities and difficulties of living in this area and in Brooklet.

Any social media accounts/contact information you'd like the public to have if voters would like to reach out to you:

I have a Facebook page for my Mayoral Campaign – Charles 'Charlie' Howell for Mayor of Brooklet. Please 'like' and comment with any suggestions, questions, or positive support for my campaign.