



2022 JANESVILLE CITY COUNCIL CANDIDATES

Q&A



We are pleased to present the 2022 Forward Janesville City Council candidate questionnaire.

After careful consideration and consultation with the Forward Janesville Board and Government Relations Council leadership, we determined that a candidate questionnaire was the most efficient way to present the candidates and their viewpoints to our Membership. Forward Janesville does not endorse candidates, but instead provides this kind of comprehensive information to our members.

Wisconsin's Spring Election is on Tuesday, April 5, 2022. Visit My Vote Wisconsin (myvote.wi.gov) for comprehensive, non-partisan information on what's on your ballot, absentee voting and polling place information, and much more.

There is much at stake on April 5. The Janesville City Council and the Janesville School Board regularly make important decisions that affect our community and your organization's performance. It is extremely important for all of us to vote on April 5.

We hope that you find this document to be useful, and we encourage you to share this information with your employees, your network, and your neighbors.

Meet the Candidates



Paul Benson



Brian Bridges



Aaron Burdick



Thomas Lepinski



Steph Meiklejohn



Richard Neeno



Paul Williams

As we look to 2022 Here are our key initiatives we are zeroing on to affect with our community partners:

- Create a Forward Janesville Community Scorecard
- Promote business growth that raises our community median household income
- Build partnership and plan with Educational Partners to improve student outcomes and workforce capabilities
- Strengthen entrepreneurial ecosystem to increase number of successful start ups
- Evaluate and support important Quality of life improvement projects
- Continue building out Residential strategy that supports a population of 70,000 by 2030 while maintaining advantageous cost of living
- Increase Membership to achieve a 45% penetration of businesses in Janesville by 2025 (national average of 38%)



What qualities and experience do you have that will make you a good city council member?

PAUL BENSON:

I'm a positive, forward thinking person. I'm not afraid of change. I will continue to support business expansion and economic growth in Janesville. Regarding my experience, I've been on the council for three years and am currently the vice president. I was born and raised in Janesville but moved away for a decade and chose to come back. I think that experience gives me a unique perspective. I'm also a small business owner with two employees. Although it's not the biggest business, I still understand the challenges that face every business to remain profitable.

BRIAN BRIDGES:

I believe the knowledge and experience I have gained from 25 years of being in business for myself is my strongest asset. It has taught me how to analyze difficult issues, problem solve, and develop economically feasible strategies to move forward.

AARON BURDICK:

I have 23 years of experience in Law Enforcement (LE); currently I'm the Captain of Detectives. During my years in LE, I have researched, implemented, commanded and budgeted for programs. I'm also tasked with assisting in proposing and submitting a yearly multi-million dollar budget. I would bring ingenuity, work ethic, strong character, credibility and strong communication skills to the Janesville City Council.

THOMAS LEPINSKI:

I am a good listener and willing to negotiate solutions to issues before the City. My prior S.E.C. reporting experience has prepared me to analyze the facts and make the best decision for the residents of Janesville. Auditing Municipalities has given me an understanding of Municipal Finance and Fund Accounting.

STEPH MEIKLEJOHN:

As a lifelong resident of Janesville I am very passionate about this community and am very familiar with the quirks that make Janesville a unique and exciting place to live. I have worked in many different industries with people from all over the city so I have a stronger understanding of the various needs and desires of the people who live here and am not so set in my ways that I can't listen to counter-thoughts. I look forward to experiencing new ideas and growing together.

RICHARD NEENO:

In addition to having 25 years of insight into city government as a resident, I am currently a board member of the Business Improvement District, a city-appointed position. This position has given me insight into government operation and the issues concerning the downtown. I am also a property and small business owner, through which I have had interactions with many departments within the administration, as well as great concern for the development of the city. I am a thoughtful, deliberative person, inclined to think twice before I act or speak; I am interested in collaboration rather than being disruptive and antagonistic.

PAUL WILLIAMS:

I am a lifelong Janesville resident and have 14 years of experience on the City Council. I am a good listener, researcher, and communicator.



What are your thoughts on the role of the council and the city manager?

PAUL BENSON

The council's role is to set policy objectives, guide long term planning, and make policy decisions. We are not day to day managers. The city manager's role is to carry out the agenda set by the council while also running the day-to-day business of the city. The council also plays an important oversight role that can be difficult to navigate.

BRIAN BRIDGES:

The City Manager is the sole employee reporting directly to the Council. The City Manager's role is to implement the strategies and policies decided upon by the seven-member Council. This is by design to insure there are checks and balances in place so that neither the Council or the City Manager can over extend their day-to-day authority over City operations or activities.

AARON BURDICK:

The roles work for a common goal but exist for checks-and-balances. The city manager's role is to establish a strategic plan and overseeing departments that are tasked with carrying it out. The city council's role is to ensure the strategic plan is what's in the best interest of the city and the processes utilized by the city manager are appropriate. Ultimately, the city council holds the city manager accountable to the concerns of Janesville residents.

THOMAS LEPINSKI:

Many residents have reminded me that the City Council is elected to set policy and priorities for the City and hires the City Manager to implement the policy and priorities of the City Council.

STEPH MEIKLEJOHN:

The city council and the city manager have a very symbiotic relationship. The Council's in place to listen to the people and decide on policy according to the needs, desires and wishes of the citizens; and the city manager is in a role of implementation. Open dialog and communication between the roles is key; as neither are completely independent of the other.

RICHARD NEENO:

The basic functions of both roles are clearly defined in their job descriptions. Looking from the outside, I think that the council should be more deliberative of issues and ideas brought forward by the administration, and in general, should take a more active role in bringing forward new policies or policy changes.

PAUL WILLIAMS:

The city council members are the elected representatives of the city's citizens. We set out the agendas, policies, and procedures. We approve the annual budget. The city manager is the city-council appointed administrator of the city's policies and oversees the day-to-day activities of the city.



If a company were considering relocating to Janesville, what are the top three reasons you would give to convince them to move here?

PAUL BENSON

1. Safety – lowest crime rate in 40 years and much lower than some of the surrounding communities;
2. Parks – Amazing outdoor recreation opportunities;
3. Downtown – Fun, vibrant downtown with great restaurants, events and shopping.

BRIAN BRIDGES:

1. Low crime rate,
2. Low cost of living,
3. High quality workforce

AARON BURDICK:

Public Safety workers are some of the best trained and equipped in the state and we boast the lowest crime rate in 40 years. Revitalization of down town Janesville, I would promote the public spaces for public gatherings and celebrations. Finally, our philosophy is to promote public and private partnerships. We will work with your business to foster growth and success.

THOMAS LEPINSKI:

Excellent leadership at the Janesville Police Department resulting in a low crime rate and a safe City. Janesville is a welcoming community. Janesville and the surrounding area provide many leisure time activities.

STEPH MEIKLEJOHN:

I would focus on our pros: the city is a safe place to conduct business and bring families to work, the city is a growing and prosperous city that strives to make outsiders feel like they've always lived here, and that this community will be one that helps them grow their business.

RICHARD NEENO:

1. Cost of living far below that of surrounding metropolises, yet easy access to Madison, Milwaukee and Chicago;
2. A safe community with crime rates at an all-time low;
3. A vibrant city where there is now an inclination to grow and develop, with many opportunities for further growth.

PAUL WILLIAMS:

Janesville has a strong workforce base; is a safe city, with an over 30-year low crime rate; and has a diverse menu of amenities to offer its citizens.



The City of Janesville has a strategic planning process that maps out key priorities on a rolling five-year period. What are your thoughts about this plan and the process?

PAUL BENSON

I love the strategic plan because it helps guide all of our decisions and keep us on track towards our bigger goals. I think we could improve by making it more of a living breathing document by making it easier to make changes and reviewing the document more than once per year.

BRIAN BRIDGES:

Having a strategic plan in place is vitally important. It can be a great tool for city staff, the Council, as well as our citizens, to see this plan in writing. With a written plan, we can evaluate the priorities of the city and make adjustments as necessary. With a plan in place, we can hold the city accountable to annual goals, serving as a checklist, because plans are only as effective as their execution.

AARON BURDICK:

I believe a strategic plan is key in providing an overall direction, establishing processes of achieving these goals and a tool for accountability for city officials. I believe having a strategic plan is the most efficient way of utilizing time and resources. Even though a strategic plan may be proposed; priorities may change due to current circumstances, so this plan must be constantly re-assessed and be flexible enough to accommodate changes if necessary.

THOMAS LEPINSKI:

As requested in the last Citizen Satisfaction Survey, publish the plan and hold a resident comment session. The role of the City Council is to direct and guide the process.

STEPH MEIKLEJOHN:

I think having an accessible and understandable goal in a reasonable timeline makes it easier to take actionable steps toward the goal in a digestible scale while also making it possible for the citizens to keep its leaders accountable. I think any position of leadership should be scrutinized, as a council member my role would be to create an atmosphere to further the city and the people who live here. If I am not doing that, I should be removed.

RICHARD NEENO:

I am uncomfortable with the plan at a certain level; while planning is good and it is wise for departments to look forward, I find the plan exhausting in its detail. I am also of the impression that the administration is inclined to use the plan as blanket permission to go forward with anything included in the plan without further communication or review. While each department should have a five year plan, the administration should create an edited plan highlighting items that would require new or discretionary spending or a change to current city policy or procedures.

PAUL WILLIAMS:

I believe the plan is effective in helping both citizens and businesses to envision what the future of Janesville should look like.



As a new (or returning) council member, what would be your top priorities for the City of Janesville?

PAUL BENSON

1. Complete Woodman's Community Center project, provided it makes financial sense.
2. Make it easier for developers and contractors to work with the city planning and engineering. And hopefully change our reputation that we are the city of "No and slow."
3. Improve relationship between residents/businesses and the city manager's office.

BRIAN BRIDGES:

1. Maintaining a safe city and a low crime rate.
2. Looking for ways to increase revenues without burdening residents with higher property taxes.
3. Increasing the availability of affordable housing across a wide economic spectrum.

Aaron Burdick:

1. Address the \$583,000 loss of special assessment revenue while not reducing funding for Public Safety.
2. Ensure all avenues have been exhausted for funding source opportunities for the Woodman's Community Center and approve the project if we meet proposed goals.
3. Begin collaboration between the city and private stakeholders of the old GM property to restore the site to shovel ready industrial lots.

THOMAS LEPINSKI:

Improve communication between the City and residents and improve trust in City leadership. Balance the need for Economic Development incentives with the impact of TIF funding on the School District of Janesville. Review returning additional room tax revenue to residents as property tax relief.

STEPH MEIKLEJOHN:

My top priorities are safeguarding those who safeguard us, the police, fire and EMTs. Foster community growth. Opening communication between city leaders and the citizens.

RICHARD NEENO:

1. Continuing to create a balanced budget that will not take funds from the general fund;
2. Find funding to replace the \$580,000 state grant that will end this year while still achieving point #1;
3. Find a way to develop a financial plan for the Woodman's Athletic Center that minimizes public funds and provides positive ROI in a 2-4 year window.

PAUL WILLIAMS:

My top priorities for the city will continue to be the redevelopment of the GM/JATCO sites, helping to retain and expand current businesses in the city, continuing to help facilitate the redevelopment of the downtown, and to expand the revitalization to a westside corridor.



Please share your thoughts on the potential development of the Woodman's Indoor Athletic and Conference Center Project at the Uptown Janesville site on Milton Avenue.

PAUL BENSON

I am a big supporter of the Woodman's Center project as I think it helps solve two big problems. First, there is a lack of good options for kids during the winter. Second, the Uptown Janesville property is at a tipping point and that site is still one of the most important commercial sites in the City. If Uptown Janesville fails, it would be an anchor that would drag down the entire Milton Avenue corridor. Finally, the chance to leverage \$4M of private money with potentially \$7.5M of federal money, is very appealing from an ROI perspective.

BRIAN BRIDGES:

The city must evaluate this project based upon return on investment. I believe the Community Center has merit, but the costs must be weighed against potential benefits to our community.

These are the questions I would ask and the process I would go through in making the evaluation:

1. What will be the final cost? (The city does not have a total firm cost for the project.)
2. How much will inflation impact the rough estimates from 2021?
3. How much private funding will be available?
4. What State or Federal grant funding can we secure?
5. What will be the total cost to city taxpayers?
6. What will be the positive economic impact to the city?
7. What would be the cost for not building the Community Center?

Once all of these questions are answered, I would utilize my 25 years of business experience to analyze and prioritize the data and come to a conclusion that is within the best interest of every taxpayer within the city. If we can get the affirmative or correct answers to these questions then the idea of approving Community Center is reasonable.

AARON BURDICK:

This project would fill some current needs for Janesville. The replacement of the Ice Arena and needed conference space would attract larger business and organizations to utilize Janesville as a hosting site. This project would also infuse needed dollars into the Uptown Janesville corridor and mall. This could be a "flagship" project for Janesville.

THOMAS LEPINSKI:

The City has committed no more than \$15 million in public money to this project. The ultimate size and scope of this project will be determined by the private fundraising efforts of the Friends of the Indoor Sports Complex. Any public funding will fall 1/3 on Commercial and Manufacturing property. Forward Janesville should make the Forward Foundation available to raise any needed funds to contribute to a successful redevelopment of Uptown Janesville and the Milton Avenue corridor.

STEPH MEIKLEJOHN:

I am always for quality of life improvements and a plan of this scale I think would be very beneficial for the city as well as the families who live here; however, more than the city trying to add QoL improvements, elected officials must be able to weigh the burden that it will place on the persons who live in the city above all else. With recent increases in cost of living and growing uncertainty around the actual facility cost, I would rather put the project on the back burner if it will be unbearable by the taxpayers rather than simply pushing it through without thoughtful consideration.

RICHARD NEENO:

I think that the development would be a big positive for the city, attracting people and expenditures from outside the city and replacing an antiquated, ice arena that no longer meets the needs of its users. The current problems are that final construction costs, private donations and public costs are unknown, as well as the projected ROI. My suspicion is that the opposition to the project is a vocal minority, but to gain wider acceptance there will need to be greater private contributions. It is my hope that more government grants can be found to offset the public tax burden.

PAUL WILLIAMS:

I currently feel there are too many unanswered questions and unknowns about WIACCPUP. The first unknown is the project's cost. A second question is how much private fund-raising will be done for the project. It is still unclear whether current Uptown Janesville tenants will approve the site location. If cost were no object, the project would be a great addition to the city.



Last year, the city proposed creation of a transportation utility to fund the city's annual street repair program. While the city council ultimately chose not to enact the transportation utility, how the city funds transportation improvements will remain an issue. What ideas do you have for funding infrastructure improvements going forward?

PAUL BENSON

I did not support the transportation utility because it was far too drastic of a shift onto the business community and I fear it would make Janesville businesses unable to compete in the region. I like the current solution: Using a combination of wheel tax and storm water utility funds to cover the increased costs of the program. The wheel tax is probably the most "fair" method available to us to fund the program. I would propose adjusting the wheel tax in the future if necessary and continuing with the new status quo.

BRIAN BRIDGES:

The City Council, unfortunately, was never able to come up with a solution concerning the transportation utility last year. Clearly, this is a difficult question and is going to take some time to research and develop a workable solution. It is going to require a multi-pronged approach, but we should not expect commercial businesses to carry the entire burden. Recently, the City received a \$450,000 grant for a street repair on Black Bridge Road. I spoke with City Engineer, Mike Payne, and Mike said there is the potential of other similar grants that the city could win to help fund street repair and maintenance, but that is not going to be enough. I will research a local sales tax option, the utilization of a portion of annual state shared revenue applied to road maintenance, and potentially reduce the annual mileage of road maintenance to balance available funds.

AARON BURDICK:

Continue to seek state and federal grants for specific projects. Also research a better formula for a "user tax" that would have commercial businesses paying a fair share for road repair without making Janesville un-attractive to new and existing businesses.

THOMAS LEPINSKI:

The ability to pay needs to be the most important factor in any solution. The Council choose a regressive form of funding in asking renters and citizens struggling economically to pay an increased wheel tax and higher water bills. On April 6th we'll know the Citizen's thoughts on the solution adopted by the Council.

STEPH MEIKLEJOHN:

As a student of business, in projects of this scale, the best course of action would be to bring heads together on the issue. I have been following what was proposed and I agreed that putting a heavy tax burden on businesses, large and small, would have been unbearable and would push loyal businesses to other cities where they could thrive. Though there is not a perfect option yet, I will work alongside experts to try and build an appropriate plan that balances strong infrastructure and is reasonable for businesses and individuals.

RICHARD NEENO:

I think that the council found an excellent balance of funding for our road program; it should allow a bit of time for additional ideas to surface (bids below budget for 2022 certainly help). I am curious as to whether accumulated TIF funds could be used when streets within or abutting a TID are improved? Would moving the city truck route to Centerway/WI51 through the city (from Main Street) help push costs to the state for maintenance work as it is a state highway? Could there be savings by contracting with Rock County to do some of the construction work as the county has road building equipment?

PAUL WILLIAMS:

I believe the city council may be looking at some type of transportation utility hybrid in the future.



The City of Janesville has long been on the short end of the state's shared revenue formula. Given that fact, what ideas do you have for creation of sustainable revenue streams to fund city priorities?

PAUL BENSON

State law greatly restricts our revenue options. Under the current circumstances, I would not support going to referendum to exceed levy limits as we would lose too much money from state shared revenue. The only options left are user fees like utilities and the wheel tax. We review those fees every year and I don't see any good opportunities for increase.

BRIAN BRIDGES:

If Janesville had more control of State Shared Revenue the Transportation Utility would be a non-issue. The inequity of State Shared Revenue has been an ongoing problem for many years; frankly, I think some individuals may have given up hope for this unfair distribution to ever be corrected. I understand why they might feel that way, but we must continue to knock on doors in the State Legislature, making our case for this to change.

The one thing we can control now is making Janesville the most attractive community in Southern Wisconsin, promoting small business expansion, and attracting larger employers, bringing more high paying jobs to our community. In order to do this, we must:

1. Focus on increasing affordable housing so that we have housing for a wide spectrum of income levels to attract large employers bringing high paying jobs to Janesville.
2. Work with the Janesville School District, to improve academic test scores and graduation statistics.
3. Focus on maintaining high levels of public safety and low crime rates.

AARON BURDICK:

Continue to focus on bringing business into the city to raise net-new construction to keep up with inflation. Other potential ideas would be to lobby state legislatures to allow municipalities to raise tax rates at the same rate of inflation if greater than the levy limits. Also, look at possibly lobbying the state to allow municipalities to institute their own temporary sales tax to pay for large community projects. Petition the state to allow the counties along the state line to raise sales tax closer to the rate of IL if they so wish. For example, Winnebago CO IL sales tax rate is as follows: 6.25% state sales tax, 1.5% Winnebago CO for total sales tax of 7.75% versus 5.5% in Rock Co.

THOMAS LEPINSKI:

The City Legislative Agenda states that the current shared revenue formula costs the City of Janesville \$5.7 million annually. Utilize the Political Action Committee of Forward Janesville to bring about change.

STEPH MEIKLEJOHN:

As relying on the state at this time is not sustainable, focus on drawing more business and more citizens to operate in our city is key. As Janesville continues to be a city people want reside in and businesses want to conduct in, we will be able to be self-sufficient. We cannot focus on what we aren't getting from outside of ourselves, but build upon our strengths and continue to draw others to Janesville.

RICHARD NEENO:

Difficult and it assumes that the city has missed existing opportunities. Perhaps the slowest, but most dependable would be to continue the aggressive use of TID/TIF in order to further development which will expand the tax valuation of the city. Development will continue the demand for housing, increase home valuations and increase tax revenues.

PAUL WILLIAMS:

We will continue to work with the state legislature to TRY to create sustainable revenue streams, but the city is very limited by existing constraints.



The City of Janesville and other partnering organizations have made significant investments in Downtown Janesville. What role do you think the city should play in downtown development?

PAUL BENSON

I think the Town Square project combined with the Main St. and W. Milwaukee St. projects were the perfect catalyst for our downtown redevelopment. I now think the downtown business community is largely self-sustaining. I would continue to support Pay-Go TIF deals to bring large apartment projects to the downtown.

BRIAN BRIDGES:

The city should continue to foster partnerships with downtown private enterprise, such as the new Bounce Back Grant program, to help fill vacant buildings downtown. I believe the city should consider easing code restrictions or policies whenever it might make sense so that business expansion downtown is not hindered. The city should utilize any and all economic tools to attract new business downtown but also to attract residential development downtown. For years, downtown business has sought ways to attract people to the downtown; residential expansion downtown is key to helping the downtown business to thrive.

AARON BURDICK:

I believe the city should play a significant role in the development of downtown Janesville. I strongly believe in partnering with private organizations whose causes are to promote Janesville and the well-being of its citizens. Collaborating and combining resources could be used as a force multiplier in jump starting economic development. This should be a model of success moving forward.

THOMAS LEPINSKI:

Most residents think that the investment in Downtown Janesville was appropriate. The City should call on it's Public/Private Partnership with the Forward Foundation to raise additional private funds for downtown improvements.

STEPH MEIKLEJOHN:

I appreciate the initial push that Janesville has given to the city to help revitalize the downtown, I just don't want us to get entirely focused on one aspect and forget about others. Janesville is a diverse and expansive city; I would love to see the city invest in other areas as well, such as the south and west sides of the city. We all pay taxes here, we all deserve to be cared for.

RICHARD NEENO:

The downtown has benefited greatly from public and private investments in recent years. We (downtown businesses) have now built an energy to continue the development of downtown. The city should be involved in assisting new development and maintaining infrastructure. If other public investments are needed, they should be weighed as are all other investments. The downtown now benefits from great private leadership, and the city should offer assistance whenever possible.

PAUL WILLIAMS:

The city should have a major role in facilitating development—downtown and elsewhere—whether that facilitation may be applying for grants, creating TIF districts, seeking private funding, or any other type of financial assistance.