

Franklin's future: Tom Miller on the way he sees things
By Dave Raiford
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In a country where growth and development have been more than buzzwords rolling off the tongues of governmental officials looking to boost their tax base, the city of Franklin has been a case study of the benefits and challenges when population swells.

Between 1990 and 2000, the city's population more than doubled to about 42,000. More than two-thirds of Franklin's residents have lived in the city for less than 10 years.

Tom Miller, who was first elected to the Franklin Board of Aldermen in 1997, last year won the campaign to become mayor, topping long time chief Jerry Sharber.

Miller has his view of where Franklin is headed and the seemingly never-ending task of balancing growth and infrastructure. The Nashville Business Journal asked him to answer a few questions about his vision.

NBJ: What has been the biggest challenge for you since you've become mayor?

Miller: Time management. Balancing government activities, job responsibilities and family life has created some stress. The previous mayor had been in office 14 years, so everyone knew his style and priorities. Because I'm new to the office, a large number of people have wanted to get to know the mayor.

In addition, we have had to deal with a very complex and sensitive issue regarding one of the city department heads. I was not expecting this kind of issue so soon in the term. I thought there was a federal statute that granted mayors a 100 day "honeymoon." That is obviously not the case.

NBJ: The perception is that you are anti-growth or at best lukewarm to the idea of further development. Is that a misconception?

Miller: I believe that for a community to prosper, it must grow. Therefore, I am not anti growth. However, I also believe that growth must be on the city's terms, meaning that all development must conform to the standards and guidelines established by the city. To the extent that developers are willing to meet the standards, they will be welcomed. Otherwise, they can develop elsewhere.

The city will not be recruiting residential or retail development. We will be taking a very active role in the recruitment of commercial development with the goal of attracting jobs to Franklin. Recently, we lost out on a bid to attract a corporate headquarters. We are currently in the final phase of attracting another corporate headquarters. With quality jobs being recruited, the residential and retail developments will follow.

NBJ: Given the rapid growth of Franklin and Williamson County in general, how well equipped is the city in meeting the growing demands or infrastructure including education?

Miller: We have a good major thoroughfare plan and a good land use plan. Our waste water system is in the final stages of being completed, which will serve us for at least the next 20 years. Within the next 12 months, we will have solved our water supply problems. Our infrastructure is in excellent shape.

The city of Franklin does not have any operational responsibility for education, but our taxpayers are concerned about education, so we must be involved. For too long, the city's attitude has been that education is the sole responsibility of others. That is wrong.

In the future, we will be requiring residential developers to contribute to the cost of providing schools for the children that will be coming to Franklin as a result of their development. How they will contribute is an open question for now. We will be working with educators and developers to solve this problem.

NBJ: Westhaven is the largest residential development in the city. How do you envision the city meeting the demands of traffic flow in that area? And what is your view on the type of development?

Miller: I believe that this type of development, master-planned and multi-use, is the way we should develop in the future. Such developments when fully built out, will reduce the number of trips taken. We will encourage such developments.

Specific to Westhaven, they are limited in the number of units they can develop until the northwest quadrant of the Mack Hatcher By-Pass is completed. Until the by-pass is completed, we will be very cautious in approving additional developments, regardless of size.

NBJ: Quality of life comes up high on the list when people talk about Franklin as a place to live. Yet there are many aspects of growth and development that seem to threaten those very attributes. How can the city balance its popularity as a place to live with the demands that growth create?

Miller: Shortly, we will be announcing the acquisition of a major property to add to our parks system. We will be building linear parks to facilitate movement around the city without automobiles. Subject to strict design review guidelines, we will be looking at higher-density developments to reduce urban sprawl.

The word "connectivity" will become an often repeated phrase relative to development. We will strive to make it easier to get from point to point without the necessity of building bigger and bigger roads.

NBJ: What would the annexation of Goose Creek accomplish for the city?

Miller: Two things – first, it will give the city control of its southern gateway. We will be able to set the standard for development in the area. Secondly, it will be a generator of significant property and sales tax revenue. Very little development can happen without adequate sewer service. Franklin is the only entity capable of supplying sewer service to the area. This gives us another way to influence the development of the area.

NBJ: Considering the increase of property values in the city, what can be done to address affordable housing?

Miller: This is probably the greatest challenge before us. Franklin Tomorrow has a task force working on this issue and they are making progress toward a solution. I will soon be introducing a down payment assistance program for city workers. We will use our experience with this program to encourage other businesses to introduce a similar program.

NBJ: Do you foresee a consolidated county government structure in the cards for Williamson County?

Miller: Williamson County is quickly changing from a rural to urban community. However, there are still too many differences between the various incorporated and unincorporated areas to make a consolidated government feasible at this time. I do believe there are functions of government that could be consolidated such as parks and recreation, water and sewer and schools.