

Thanks, Scott. I appreciate the opportunity to share my ideas on a variety of topics.

Give me your thoughts on what kind of changes you would like to see to urban agriculture ordinances, if any?

There was a time when growing a few tomatoes and a couple rows of corn in your backyard wasn't unusual. And, years ago, a hen house outside the kitchen door was common in town and country life.

In the last couple of decades, we've been more likely to look for quick foods in the grocery freezer aisle and we have learned more recently the consequences for eating so much processed food. One of my favorite books is "Animal, Vegetable, Miracle" by Barbara Kingsolver. It documents a year in the life of a family who did their best to either raise their own food or buy it from producers very close to their home. It is a fascinating story of time spent with family and of really nutritious food prepared well and served with love.

So, many of us now are looking for ways to live something like that family. Some folks in Sioux Falls are raising chickens for their eggs and meat. Many of us have backyard gardens. And, the Sioux Falls Community Garden program that I founded with the Minnehaha Master Gardeners 12 years ago has grown to 10 sites and covers more than 10 acres of land in the city, serving 200+ families and their friends.

The problem, then, is that none of these activities is covered by ordinance. If my neighbor decides to have a flock of chickens in his backyard, I have no real recourse to protect my own property from the possible smell and noise. And, he has no real guidelines for how many chickens he can have and the level of maintenance expected to keep his project from bothering his neighbors.

And, my beloved community gardens technically violate existing ordinance because they aren't on land where a dwelling (house or apartment) is located. So, the intention of the Urban Ag Task Force was to address our rights as property owners to 1. Have gardens and maybe small animals and 2. Protect ourselves from our neighbors who might get out of line with their gardens or animals.

I spoke to the group at a recent meeting and just cautioned them to think about empowering and not crippling urban farmers. Community gardens have fit our lifestyle since long before I started this one small program. And, a few chickens or rabbits here and there won't hurt anyone. We just have to find a comfortable and common sense formula for providing some controls.

Each of us must be able to use our property in ways that we find appropriate. And, each of us has the right to not be offended, injured or unreasonably disturbed by the actions of our neighbors on their property.

I did point the group to the community garden rules that are posted on the city website at www.siouxfalls.org/parks. Not because the city needs to legislate "how to garden" but because it's a great example of a group of people getting together with the understanding that they are a community within a community. There are standards we all must meet in order to live together peaceably and profitably, and we can do it without too much undue government interference.

Do you think the Charter Revision Commission did the right thing by tabling controversial amendments in relation to the mayor's executive powers?

I'm not going to give you a history lesson but after the change to the strong mayor-council form from the commission form of government, the council voted to give up its state-mandated responsibility to review all city contracts over the state bid limits. It's a responsibility taken seriously by all other local governments around us: Minnehaha County, Sioux Falls School District and a host of others. All of their governing boards review and approve contracts. Contracts appear on the body's agenda: Easy for citizens to find, easy to keep the process open and clear.

It became obvious to previous Sioux Falls City Council members that it had been a mistake to give up that responsibility. Good examples: the over-spending on Phillips to the Falls and Pasley Park, and the fact that two management companies are operating one event complex at the arena/convention center site.

Councilor Kenny Anderson used to talk about the confusion over who approved what contract. He remembers discussing at length and eventually voting one time for the animal control contract. The next time it was simply awarded to whichever vendor city staff chose. "How do we decide what council approves and what it doesn't," he asked. He was told the decision was up to the specific director. Not elected officials, but appointed staff.

The issue of financing street construction, specifically the streets to and into new developments, really brought the issue to a head in 2009-10. Council was seeing projects in construction that had never been presented to them publicly. Other projects that had been approved by council were left undone with no explanation.

It was enough to get Councilors Jamison and Brown to bring the issue to a vote of the council. After literally years of work, this city council took back its rightful responsibility to review and approve all city contracts. We voted for it in October and began the new system around the first of the year. In a word, it works great. Council members and citizens alike can quickly find each project contract, the vendor(s) involved and the amount to be paid. Council will have the final say in the management of city facilities like the new event center and Council will have better control over specific projects.

So, from my standpoint it was shocking to see the Charter Revision Commission take a stand against that work and, essentially, suggest that the council shouldn't have access to contracts and citizens shouldn't be able to get that information so easily. They wanted all contract negotiation and approval in the hands of the mayor.

Several councilors did spend time making contact with various members of the Charter Revision Commission. The most disturbing information for me was the lack of training the group had. Some members were unaware they have a three-year term and that previous Charter Revision Commissions have used the entire three years to review ideas for changes before ever proposing items for the ballot.

Fortunately, the group has taken a step toward more thoughtful consideration of items. I strongly believe the Charter is a living document that needs to change as the city changes. But, it can't be done in a fashion that squelches public comment and long, well-researched discussion of every proposal.

Do you think some members of the CRC have clear and blatant conflicts of interest?

You know, I don't know. Some people characterize it that way because some folks on the Charter Revision Commission are also listed on the mayor's financial statements as being donors to his 2010 campaign. That's a tough call that I'll leave to someone far smarter than me. This is still essentially a small town when it comes to politics. "Everyone knows everyone" and it's difficult to find people who are willing to serve who haven't already been involved in some form of local political activity.

That being said, the members of the Charter Revision Commission are subject to advice and consent of the city council. The mayor picked them but we voted to approve them. I looked at that list and read their bios. I personally know four of the five people from other community involvement. They are all good people with a love for their city. I simply go back to the lack of training for this incredibly important job. I'm disappointed that they weren't helped to understand the depth and breadth of their work and the fact that they thought three one-hour meetings would be more than adequate to present major changes to our governing document.

Do you think snow gates have a chance of being implemented and approved by the city council and mayor or will voters have to tough this one out and have a petition drive to put it on the ballot?

Snow gates are not especially popular among the people who have to make the decisions about how we spend our precious tax dollars. Previous, extensive study of snow gates in various communities across the country has shown that they increase the cost of snow removal while slowing down the process.

In Sioux Falls, we like to have our streets clean to the curb within a day or so of every storm. We don't want snow to keep us from going about our business. If we decide we want snow gates, we must also decide to lower those standards for timeliness and completeness.

One of last year's test areas was in the Central District that elected me. One resident there said to me, "I don't care what it costs. You can increase my taxes, just get us snow gates."

To that I say, "Really?"

What is an acceptable increase in your taxes? And, if you're not serious about raising taxes, what would you like to have cut out of the budget so your driveway will be cleared? Parks? School health clinics? Sewer line maintenance? I'm not being argumentative, I just need a list so I know where to start.

My family and I are responsible for clearing two driveways in Sioux Falls. In addition to our house, my mother owns her home here and we help her with maintenance. Many times we've made it a family project to clear those plow ridges with shovels and ice choppers. I understand the issue and I'm grateful for the friendly neighbor who occasionally brings over his snowblower.

I think I've been clear that I appreciate the conversations around the issues of local government. I expect this conversation to go on for some time and I want to see clear, unbiased statistics from the testing in process with the public works department. I have done a ton of research on these things personally and I have not, at this time, been convinced of their effectiveness or their affordability for Sioux Falls.

Municipal elections actually excite me, and I am looking forward to April. Fortunately you are not up for re-election this cycle. What are the benefits of getting to watch this? Are you supporting any particular candidates?

I'm like you, Scott. I'm a total local government nerd. I love watching the process and going to the forums to hear the candidates. At this writing Feb. 1, I don't know any of the candidates except the incumbents in the Northeast, Northwest and Southwest districts. I like them as individuals and as colleagues and I wish them the best. But, I also encourage others to become informed and involved. Active participation in the process is the key to better government at all levels. And, please, be sure to vote on April 10.

Public input at council meetings has been a hot topic lately. Personally, I think it should be left as is. What are your thoughts on the topic? I actually don't mind it at the beginning of the meetings as we have it now. But I can see both sides and I've heard citizen input from both sides. On one hand, there are often people in attendance who will be speaking or presenting on a specific agenda item. Is it fair to make them wait through an unpredictable amount of public opinion? On the other hand, what's wrong with that? They know public input is part of the agenda and they know our policy for "y'all come."

Regardless where it ends up, I never want the Sioux Falls City Council to abolish public input at its meetings. It's a foundation of our liberties as citizens and a key part of the process of governing.

Recently there have been questions about whether the city council broke state open meetings laws by walking in and voting on resolutions to hire a new city clerk. Will you defend your actions?

I am not a fan of the practice of "walking in" an item for the council agenda but it is legally allowed and the mayor and various department heads do it on an occasional basis. This was the first time I recall seeing council use this provision in the years I've been watching.

We had an issue of timing with the job openings for city clerk and legislative/operations manager. If we had waited for a later meeting date, the lag time would have been unacceptable between the time our interim clerk leaves office and the new folks would be on board.

It is our hope that we will still have the opportunity to change council meeting dates to Tuesdays from Mondays. Inside that legislation is a series of more forgiving deadlines for submitting items to be included on an agenda. Essentially, moving to Tuesday meetings will erase the need for ever walking in an item.

Most people in political circles in Sioux Falls know the details surrounding the termination of former city clerk, Debra Owen, including myself. I'm not asking for a confession, but I am wondering, if this information becomes public, don't you think it will be embarrassing for the city councilors who voted to terminate her?

It's interesting to me that you claim so many people know the contents of conversations that were held in legal executive sessions related to private personnel issues. It is a violation of state law to reveal information disclosed in executive session.

I would never speak ill of anyone involved in this or any other personnel matter. This topic is a matter of privacy between an employee and employer. That being said, I stand behind the council's actions and know in my heart and in my mind that we did the right thing.

Finally, it is my hope that those folks who still cling to this issue will simply let it go. We have too much good happening and too many more important issues to be discussed to let ourselves bog in the past.

Would you like to finish with telling us about a neighborhood summit you are hosting?

Thanks. I wouldn't call it a summit. It's just a conversation where I hope I won't be doing much talking. I represent the Central District and I would like to meet with my friends and neighbors to talk issues and share ideas about the places we live and the needs of our city. A couple of residents in particular have encouraged me to do this and I had planned during my campaign that I would start doing these sessions right away. So, I have reserved a meeting room in the main library downtown for 9-10:30-ish Saturday, March 3.

We'll talk about whatever people want to talk about. I'll try to answer questions if I can but I expect to mostly be taking notes and listening to the things that are on the minds of those who attend. I probably should promise to bring cookies to try to build a crowd. I'm concerned it will be a snooze fest. But, Citylink will be there and we can have some fun so I invite anyone to join me. If it's just you and me, we'll have lots of cookies to eat. (I won't make coffee ...you don't want to drink coffee I make, so bring your own!)