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Political paths: Tacoma mayoral candidates

Candidates for Tacoma mayor bring markedly different experiences to their campaigns

LEWIS KAMB; The News Tribune

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Away from the crowded candidates' forums, high-powered glad-handing sessions and usual fund-raising events, the campaign trail leading to the office of Tacoma's next mayor swings through some out-of-the-way corners of the city.

For Jim Merritt, the road has taken him to an obscure coffee shop in the Dome District, where one recent afternoon he pored over architectural drawings and photographs with two structural engineers and a neighborhood businessman.

The meeting marked a turning point for a grass-roots effort to draft an alternative to a government design for a commuter rail line proposed for the neighborhood south of downtown.

For Marilyn Strickland, the journey has included a late-evening dash from a City Council committee hearing to a drafty meeting house on the Hilltop, where over a warm pasta dinner, she and fellow members of a community-based nonprofit brainstormed ideas for a new mentoring program for parents of at-risk students.

The program's overall goal: to improve academic achievement by enhancing conditions away from the classroom.

For both candidates, each issue was part of a respective civics-minded agenda long before either had publicly declared their intentions for Tacoma's highest elected office. Yet for each, these respective issues have pumped campaign blood into what has become the heart of their political platforms.

Merritt, 62, a longtime Tacoma architect, North End homeowner and married father of three grown children, has championed the so-called "post-and-beam" design alternative to Sound Transit's plan for an earthen berm as a cure to a symptom of a much bigger illness he says infects Tacoma: That City Hall isn't listening to its citizens.

"As a city, we've accepted substandard too many times," Merritt said.

Strickland, 47, a single, first-term City Council member who owns and lives in a downtown condominium, has promoted herself as the "education candidate" behind creative programs such as the McCarver Moms mentoring group. Strickland points to the effort as an example of how community resources can be redirected to enhance public education, and in turn, the city's future.

"Education should be a civic priority," she said.

On the campaign trail, both candidates have exuded confidence, intelligence and energy. Each has served on a variety of public boards and commissions and tout private sector experience on their resumé's.

"It's one of those rare times when I felt that both can do the job," said former governor and Tacoma resident Booth Gardner, when explaining why he endorsed both Strickland and Merritt.

But come Nov. 3, voters will not have the luxury of splitting their ballots in the city's first competitive mayor's race since 2001.

Although the position is partly that of figurehead in Tacoma's council-city manager form of government, the mayor's primary role is serving on the council. But additional administrative and ceremonial duties make the mayor the de-facto face of the city, and with those added responsibilities comes an \$81,862 salary.

MARYILYN STRICKLAND

In a sprawling but mostly empty former travel agency that serves as her campaign headquarters, Marilyn Strickland recently explained why she's running for higher office after serving less than two years on the City Council.

"I love this city. I have a passion for it. And, the opportunity presented itself," said Strickland of the seat soon to be opened by term limits on incumbent Mayor Bill Baarsma.

"I've been on the council long enough to understand how things work," she added, "but not long enough to be entrenched and defend everything we do."

Though technically, the mayor's job is nonpartisan, Strickland's political colors are easy to read. The sole adornment in her temporarily donated campaign space is an autographed photograph of John F. Kennedy Jr. And the back end of her aging Volkswagen Jetta displays an Obama bumper sticker.

Campaign manager Jessica Bennett speaks of Strickland in terms of a friendship forged on a different campaign trail – both served last year as national delegates for Barack Obama in 2008.

"Marilyn is above all a good person," said Bennett, who with veteran campaign consultant Terry Thompson make up Strickland's main campaign team. "She's the epitome of a progressive, forward-thinking candidate."

Born in Seoul, South Korea, to an African-American father and a Korean mother, the publicly reserved city politician's unlikely namesake is the breathy Hollywood icon Marilyn Monroe. Her father was a big fan who "served overseas when she was doing her thing," Strickland explained.

When Strickland was 4, her father was transferred to Fort Lewis and the family moved to South Tacoma. She attended public schools, eventually graduating from Mount Tahoma High School. She later earned a sociology degree from the University of Washington, and a master's degree in business administration from Clark Atlanta University in Georgia.

Strickland since has worked for a host of employers.

She was a direct marketing coordinator and did fundraising for the American Cancer Society, was a marketing manager for Starbucks and was an account manager for JayRay Communications.

She then took a city job with the Tacoma Public Library, where she eventually was promoted to development director. Most recently, she worked as an interim director of marketing and communications for Bates Technical College.

“All of it gives me a base of knowledge,” Strickland said of her background. “Now that I’m a council member, I draw on all of my experiences, generally speaking, when making decisions.”

Strickland counts among some of her top issues developing a comprehensive transportation strategy, raising Tacoma’s profile as an emerging city and developing jobs and the economy.

Tacoma already is brimming with colleges and universities, hospital and health care institutions, and small technology firms that can make it into “a science and tech hub,” she said.

“We have amazing assets already,” Strickland said. “There are opportunities right here that if we’re able to nurture them, we’ll become an automatic magnet for more of these types of businesses.”

But Strickland’s mayoral campaign has largely struck the same theme as her first run for political office two years ago, when she won an at-large council seat. She touted herself then as the education candidate – a refrain repeated during this election season.

Asked why she didn’t instead run for school board, Strickland responded that education at its core is a broader city issue.

“Almost everything relates back to education,” she said. “Crime, jobs, economic development.”

“When Russell (Investments) left Tacoma, part of the reason they gave is that they could find a bigger talent pool elsewhere,” Strickland added. “That speaks directly to our education system. It’s not just an issue for the School Board. It’s an issue for this city.”

While serving on the City Council, Strickland has brought a more focused plan to engage city resources in both traditional and alternative education programs, some city insiders say.

With Councilwoman Connie Ladenburg, she recently championed a proposal to launch Tacoma 360 – a collaboration among the city, Metro Parks Tacoma and the Tacoma School Board. The new agency will be an independent nonprofit, but will receive start-up funding from all three government entities, which also will help coordinate its establishment.

Though still largely undefined, Tacoma 360 aims to target nonprofit and government resources to help combat issues of illiteracy, homelessness, truancy and other problems. Its the broader goal is to close the gap between minority students’ test scores and average student scores and reduce high drop-out rates in Tacoma schools.

Calling it an unfocused, duplicative use of resources unlikely to lead to real change, two fellow council members opposed the project. But Strickland and Ladenburg won the support needed to enact an agreement to start the program.

“I would say it’s one of the biggest accomplishments I’ve been involved in (while on the council),” Strickland said.

Strickland also helped to establish the City of Destiny Scholarship to aid freshman and sophomore students attending colleges in Tacoma with money for tuition.

Not all of Strickland’s forays into education have succeeded. Earlier this year, city voters trounced a \$300 million schools capital improvements levy campaign she co-chaired.

“I don’t see it as a failure,” said Strickland, noting that a similar levy proposal failed in Puyallup. “It was symptomatic of a bad economy.”

Among her endorsements and campaign contributors, Strickland has won support from several labor groups and is backed by a host of local and state politicians, including at least six sitting council members and three past and present mayors – Baarsma, Harold Moss and Brian Ebersole.

“Here is a person who has a greater connection to a broader base of people,” said Lyle Quasim, a longtime local political figure and ardent supporter of Strickland. “When I’m at events for Marilyn, I look around the room and see a microcosm of Tacoma. There are people from all backgrounds, all races, all segments of society. And I think, ‘This is where we’re going, not where we’ve been.’ ”

While on the council, Strickland has exhibited a bookish demeanor, seemingly more content to listen and absorb issues than to publicly speak to them. Part of that stoicism has been intentional, she said, a way to learn and build trust.

“I’m not a chest beater, but I do have backbone,” Strickland said. “And I am ready to lead.”

JIM MERRITT

Lining the walls of one of Tacoma’s architectural icons – the nearly century-old brick and timbered Swiss Hall – are dozens of framed renderings of building projects that have risen from ideas on a page to real-life structures in lumber, concrete and steel.

North Beach High School. Fife Community Swimming Pool. Tacoma-Pierce County Blood Bank. All of them – proudly displayed in a professional office that now doubles as campaign headquarters – offer testament to Jim Merritt’s life’s work.

It’s through such projects, over the course of more than a three-decade career, that Merritt says he has forged the experience and will to lead Tacoma.

“My experience and architectural background has been all about bringing people together,” Merritt said. “Over 30 years, I know all the players, I know how to work with them and they trust me.”

The son of a Tacoma area contractor who died when Merritt was 12, Merritt recalls “people talking about the same issues (as today) going back to when I was growing up.”

“One thing I always remember hearing from too many people is that they didn’t trust our town,” Merritt said. “It’s always something I thought I could change.”

After attending Fife High School, Merritt graduated in 1970 first among a class of about 70 students at the UW's School of Architecture and Urban Planning with a bachelor's degree in architecture. He met and married his wife, Claudia, a microbiologist, three years later, and the couple raised three children, each graduating from a different city high school.

Meanwhile, Merritt established an architectural career that took on some of the city's most important public works projects in recent memory. His work to renovate a dilapidated Union Station helped to save a historic centerpiece for a re-emerging downtown, and his design plan for the cable-stay bridge has proved to be an iconic expression of New Tacoma.

Such projects involved thinking creatively and cooperatively, Merritt said, but they also meant not accepting second-rate solutions.

"As a city, Tacoma has accepted these things too many times," he said. "We can do better."

For Merritt, that phrase has become a mantra, one that organically led him more than three years ago to begin questioning Sound Transit's commuter rail designs for the Dome District.

Merritt, who contends the agency's current plan is aesthetically unpleasing and isolating, believes the "post-and-beam" alternative offers a better model for the neighborhood. A host of neighborhood stakeholders agree, and in turn, have become supporters of Merritt's run for office.

Keith Stone, a Dome District construction firm owner who has donated heavily to Merritt's campaign, said he largely had stayed out of city politics – until this year, when he found a candidate he truly believes in.

"What makes Jim different is he wants this city to be great," Stone said. "He doesn't believe the City Council or anybody else should come in and tell people, 'This is what's going to happen no matter what you say.' He's going to be a strong mayor."

Some critics have said Merritt's growing involvement in the localized fight over a commuter rail design has cast him as a single-issue candidate.

"Quite the opposite," Merritt countered. "I've got issues all over this city. But frankly, a lot of them go back to a common problem: The elected officials aren't listening."

A wonky optimist, Merritt keeps his desk highly organized and seemingly carries a pencil and architectural pad at all times to help illustrate his thoughts. Merritt believes private-sector experience, such as his, is sorely lacking at City Hall.

"Tacoma needs to become a more customer- and service-friendly city for citizens and businesses," he said.

Merritt's plan to make it so? The city needs to revamp everything from the simple: how it approves and processes permits; to the complex: how it bases the city budget on revenues from business taxes that drive local firms out of town.

"When a company is looking for a new home, they will not pick Tacoma if they get the vibe that existing businesses don't like the environment," Merritt said.

Merritt's business interests in Tacoma go beyond the locale of his architectural firm. Campaign disclosure records show he has commercial and rental properties in the city, and Merritt Architecture has won past city contracts.

"I do have one small contract with the city that will wind up very shortly," said Merritt, adding that if he's elected, "our firm could not have any further city work."

Merritt added that should he become mayor, his decision-making on public issues would not come into conflict with his private ventures.

"I've felt I had to be more exemplary in those (private dealings) because of my profile and being an architect in the community," Merritt said. "That will not change, and might be even more so, as mayor."

As his business sometimes involves public projects, Merritt said he has largely kept out of partisan politics. He said the few candidates he has given money to over the years have tended to be Democrats – Norm Dicks, Chris Gregoire, Dan Ladenburg.

"There's been a few Republicans – I liked Dan Evans, who was an architect by training," he said. "But I'm very much a moderate."

Campaign manager Ronnie Bush said Merritt has heard a resounding message while on the campaign trail.

"The pounding we're hearing is that government is not listening, the city does not listen, my council member does not listen," Bush said. "The second word we hear is 'potholes.' "

To that problem, Merritt said, the city also has accepted an inferior solution – quick-fix street overlays.

"We are spending millions of dollars on short-term fixes instead of using a higher quality pothole patch that maybe doesn't look as good, but will dramatically improve infrastructure," he said.

Merritt's camp has received strong financial help from individuals, businesses and groups tied to the construction profession, but he says he's not the building industry's candidate.

Merritt recently lost the county Master Builders Association's endorsement – a loss, he contends, that came because he opposes the North Shore development, a controversial project that would build hundreds of homes over a golf course in Northeast Tacoma.

"It's the only green space left in Northeast Tacoma," Merritt said. "That development would be a travesty for this city."

Strickland, who won the association's endorsement, did not publicly state a position on the development, citing the potential for putting herself in conflict of a pending issue that could come before the City Council.

In the wake of that endorsement loss, Merritt won support from a neighborhood opposition group now fighting the building project – a group whose mission Merritt believes melds well with his own.

“Never throw your hands in the air and say, ‘No way,’ ” Merritt said. “There’s always a way.”

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marilyn Strickland

Age: 47

Occupation: Tacoma City Council member

Personal: Single, downtown condo owner.

Education: Bachelor of arts degree in sociology, University of Washington; master of business administration degree, Clark Atlanta University in Georgia.

Experience: Has worked for American Cancer Society and held management positions for Starbucks, JRay Communications and Tacoma Public Library.

Member of several community groups, including the Black Collective of Tacoma-Pierce County; served on several nonprofit boards, including Grand Cinema and KBTC Television Association.

Jim Merritt

Age: 62

Occupation: Architect

Personal: Married, North End homeowner, three children and one grandchild.

Education: Bachelor of architecture degree, University of Washington.

Experience: Business owner and principal of Merritt Architecture; member of several professional and community organizations, including the Rotary Club and American Institute of Architects; served on several boards and commissions, including Landmarks Preservation Commission of Tacoma.

ISSUES

Economic development: With Russell Investments’ recent decision to leave Tacoma, what’s your plan for attracting business and commerce to Tacoma?

Marilyn Strickland: We need to attract more tourists. I often hear first-time visitors remark on how impressed they are with our city and its unique neighborhoods.

My economic recovery strategy builds on Tacoma’s assets and is based on the following: investing in education; creating a climate of innovation; focusing on high-growth industries of the future such as clean energy, health care, technology and the creative arts; embracing 21st century transportation; and positioning Tacoma as Washington state’s urban college town.

Improving educational outcomes, removing barriers to private investment and diversifying our economic base are keys to sustainable growth, and our ability to retain and attract businesses of all sizes.

Jim Merritt: I will work to make Tacoma a user-friendly city for family wage job growth by developing a customer-friendly culture to treat every citizen as a valued patron.

The tax structure, permit process and licensing procedures must be addressed to help existing businesses survive, nurture local companies and attract new ones. I will work to replace the local B&O tax so that it will not be a discouragement for businesses to locate in Tacoma. I will see that we “check in” with each company regularly to assure that we are treating them right.

With this approach, the companies of our town will be our best ambassadors to those that are considering coming to Tacoma.

Transportation: What are your plans for ensuring Tacoma is a navigable city in the short term, with viable transportation options for future growth?

Strickland: Transportation and infrastructure improvements are about priorities, planning and funding. In the short term, we must continue to put an additional \$3.5 million from the city’s general fund each year into street repairs/maintenance and ensure neighborhood equity across the entire city.

We must also conduct a street-repair performance audit to improve efficiency and identify potential cost savings.

A viable long-term plan connects our neighborhoods to each other, to our downtown core and to our waterfront. It is based on community needs, convenience, incorporates all modes of transportation and sets the stage to attract private investment.

Merritt: With my experience and background in facilitation and construction, I will bring in local companies with expertise to address our dilapidated streets with a superior fill for the potholes in the short term while working on a multiyear approach for a long-term solution for our infrastructure.

I will bring the neighborhoods back into the decision-making with grass-roots involvement to develop a strategic plan and vision for upgrades and transportation needs.

How we define the future of streets, streetcars, light rail, bike paths, pedestrians paths and other transportation alternatives must be part of a city wide process that engages all citizens.

3. Public Safety: Although recent crime statistics show crime dipping, public safety is a constant issue. What is your plan for combating crime problems?

Strickland: Pushing crime from one neighborhood into another is a reactive approach that will not solve public safety issues in Tacoma.

A comprehensive plan and collaboration at the federal, state, county and city levels must address factors that contribute to crime, illegal gang activity and recidivism such as illiteracy, domestic and youth violence, lack of access to living-wage jobs, mental-health issues and substance abuse.

The city must continue to work with neighborhoods to engage citizens in crime-prevention practices, expand Alcohol Impact Areas if necessary, and increase the number of detectives and community liaison officers where they are most needed.

We must also continue to monitor the release of felons into Tacoma to ensure our community is not exceeding its fair share.

Merritt: I will encourage our law enforcement agencies to better connect with groups like Safe Streets, Building the Bridge and Youth Against Violence.

We need to better utilize the programs and assets we have to coordinate efforts to reduce our rising violent-crime rate and gang expansion, helping to make our city safer for everyone, from toddlers to seniors.

Instead of spending additional tax dollars, we need to engage the Tacoma School District, nonprofit groups and the business community to emphasize the importance of education to all age groups by showing a path of hope for the future.

Learning opportunities need to be strongly pushed with programs like Americorp tutoring, Stand Up For Kids, Consejo Counseling, First 5 FUNdamentals, Read to Me and other initiatives to really engage the entire community in a better future for our citizens and visitors.

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