

News: News feature

Could Anthony Foxx be Charlotte's next mayor?

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Published 11.04.2008

http://charlotte.creativeloafing.com/gyrobase/could_anthony_foxx_be_charlotte_s_next_mayor_/Content?oid=397114

In the last dozen years, several contenders have tried unsuccessfully to knock Pat McCrory from his mayoral throne. Now, with McCrory eyeing a seat in Raleigh, 2009 may be time for a change.

At-large City Councilman Anthony Foxx wants to be that change.

Last week, he announced his intention to run for mayor, whether or not McCrory beats Lt. Gov. Bev Perdue in the governor's race (which will be decided by the time this paper hits the streets). "I'm in it to win it," he said.

It's been three years since Foxx made his way into local office, when the Democrat was elected to a City Council at-large seat on a platform of putting Charlotte first. Two years later, Foxx, who is popular among local Democrats, handily won re-election. Last week's announcement was hardly a surprise (just as few observers will be shocked if City Councilman John Lassiter, a Republican, announces he will run).

Foxx's candidacy feels a little like déjà vu. Haven't we seen this play out before? A popular city councilman says early on that he's going to run for mayor, but come Election Day, it's McCrory again. (Patrick Cannon, anyone?)

What makes Foxx different? After an election season in which change has been the dominant theme, is Charlotte really ready for a change in local leadership?

Foxx thinks so. Though he didn't get into specifics of what he'd do as mayor, he said he places priority on public safety and transportation. He said Charlotte has been developing from a blueprint written in the 1980s that called for a vibrant downtown area. While that's been successful, "we're at the point where we need to establish a new blueprint," he said. "We need energy and vision to do that. I've seen the community rally around big ideas and I think this community is ready for the next big thing."

Foxx believes Charlotte needs a different leadership style to build better relationships with state and regional governments. City government, he said, should take a page from the private sector and coordinate politically with other cities in the region. "I've talked to other mayors around the region, and they've said the only time we hear from Charlotte is when there is a crisis," Foxx said.

While it may seem that Foxx is in a more powerful position as an at-large city council member -- Charlotte's form of government calls for a weak mayor and strong council -- Foxx said being mayor would afford him the opportunity to be a "persuasive voice." "Being mayor would allow the ability to help citizens and the city council understand where we need to be for the long term," he said.

If McCrory loses the race for governor, will voters elect Foxx? McCrory is currently neck-and-neck with Perdue in the polls. As mayor, McCrory for 12 years has been the face of Charlotte, and he's defeated every Democrat he's faced since 1995 by double-digits. Just last year, he defeated challenger Beverly Earle with 61 percent of the vote in this majority-Democrat city. Earle, who represents District 101 in the state

House of Representatives, had name recognition and a reputation as an effective legislator.

Charlotte hasn't had a Democratic mayor since 1987 when Harvey Gantt led the city. Cannon, a former city councilman, excited local Democrats when he announced his intent to run several years ago, but he dropped out due to personal reasons.

UNC-Charlotte political science professor Ted Arrington said Foxx's success will depend on the type of campaigner that he is. "I think Foxx is looking at the fact that McCrory might win [the governor's race]," Arrington said. "But if McCrory loses then he has lost an election and that tarnishes his image. Even if he loses the governor's race, he may not run for re-election."

While most voters last week were still focused on Election Day and who will be the next president, Foxx may have set the stage for him to have an advantage over any other candidates who plan to seek the mayor's position.

Arrington said that Foxx's early announcement of his bid to be Charlotte's next mayor gives him an advantage over other candidates who may decide to run later. Foxx's success is tied to the national election. "If [Senator Barack] Obama wins and he looks good in the first year, the enthusiasm could carry over for the Democrats," Arrington said.

And, he said, the Republican brand isn't looking good right now. Arrington said even in city politics, Democrats have been doing well. "This is a two-party town," he said.

Arrington said that McCrory's decision to run for governor may be a point that Foxx points out to voters next year, but that's probably only going to fly with people who weren't going to vote for McCrory anyway.

Foxx has said that it doesn't matter if he will face McCrory or a new comer to the mayor's seat in 2009.

"I made it abundantly clear why I made the decision to run for mayor sooner rather than later," Foxx said. "I'm not running because [McCrory's] not there or trying to take him down."

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