

017 – Developing Pickens with Planning Director Charles Reese

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[Graham]: Hey there! Welcome to the Around Pickens Podcast, I'm your host Graham Parker. I've got a little bit of a cryptic question for you: what defines the character of a community? If you pay close enough attention, you'll notice that in any town or county you travel through, things change from one end to the other. Housing, industrial areas, shopping districts, green space. It's all a collection of different land uses which exists in this delicate balance that creates the environment and feeling of where we live and work. If property use isn't stewarded well, then that balance is thrown off and disorder could eventually erode our sense of community.

Given that responsibility, it's no wonder that Pickens County's Planning and Zoning apparatus receives so much scrutiny throughout the year. Today we're going to zoom in on a new part of that apparatus by speaking with our Planning and Development office's new director. Charles Reese has years of experience managing zoning offices in both Georgia and North Carolina. He's worked in big counties, small towns, and everything in between. For the past two months or so, he's taken the helm of our Planning and Development Office, an office that is responsible for not only all residential and commercial developments on county land, but also every business in unincorporated Pickens; and that's just the day-to-day work. Apart from issuing building permits and business licenses, Charles and his staff are busy collaborating with the Marshall's office, reworking parts of our code of ordinances, and advising different boards. Needless to say, it's a tremendous amount of responsibility and I caught up with Charles a couple of weeks ago to see how he's settling into the role and what his plans are for the office. So come on along and let's hear what Charles had to say about developing the county.

Charles, thank you for joining me this morning. Uh, I think you've been on the job for what, six or seven weeks now?

[Charles]: I would say six weeks, I'm losing count.

[Graham]: Well, it's good to finally sit down with you and get to know you a little bit better.

[Charles]: Yes.

[Graham]: I'd like to start the conversation off just the way I do with all these interviews by asking you a bit about your background. Uh, where'd you go to school, what's your career been like so far, and how did you end up as our planning and development director?

[Charles]: Well, I went to a HBCU, uh, Wilberforce University right outside of Dayton, Ohio. And uh, I was there for four and a half years. Uh, took me a little longer there because I was also a recording artist, so uh, took me a little bit longer to, to uh, get out of uh, undergrad. From there I went directly into grad school. Uh, for some people uh, that's, they look at that as a mistake 'cause most people when they go into grad school they're already in their career, uh, but I decided to try to just get everything over with before I started in my career, which I didn't know at the time would be City Planning. Uh, but after a while, after a couple years in uh, grad school, uh, by the way I, that was Wright State in uh, Dayton, Ohio. Uh, I decided that I had an interest in City Planning and uh, so I uh, decided to make that as my focus um, while at uh, Wright State University.

And from there um, I found my what would be my eventual wife in Dayton. Uh, we, we uh, moved or relocated to Charlotte, North Carolina. Charlotte, North Carolina is where I actually began my City Planning career uh, for two towns. Uh, that was right outside of Charlotte, Mecklenburg County, uh, towns of Stanley, towns of Dallas. I work uh, for one town one half of the day, take my lunch, go, go up the road and work in the other uh, town. And I, I like to mention those two towns because uh, I was kind of thrown into the fire uh, very early on in my career. It really helped me in in terms of you know, what, what I've become today in terms of being a professional city planner, uh, and, and, and working in community uh, development. Uh, but those two towns was two separate boards, two separate councils. Uh, so it was, it was quite a challenge, but it was fun. I, I realized working for those two towns that yes, this is a, this is the career for me.

So, from there uh, we relocated to Atlanta, well Metro Atlanta, Georgia, and uh, I had stints in Cherokee County, DeKalb County, and some other places. Uh, also mixed in uh, worked for an engineering firm uh, where Home Depot was our, our uh, main client. So, I had an opportunity not to just work on the public side but also the private side, uh, getting to know how developers think as well. Uh, I would travel to Florida and uh, do site acquisition work for Home Depot and do their due diligence to see if they can actually develop um, in some of those areas, in Florida. So that was a great opportunity as well, adding to the skills I was already kind of being nurtured uh, uh, to, to become you know, the best uh, city official I can be.

So, from there also dabbled a little bit in real estate. So once again everything is kind of its what's make me to what I am today um, in, in Community Development. Having all those different areas of, of, of interest has really helped me in terms of customer service, in terms of how to relate with the public, um, how to relate to elected officials, um and, and just being a, a better um, uh, worker for our local government. Uh, so I, I really, really uh, am blessed that I've been able to experience uh, what I've experienced to get me to where I am today.

[Graham]: I've got to say it sounds like you've had a pretty eclectic career over the last two decades. Uh, I guess you do like a challenge. I'm, uh, I'm curious when you look back on it, are there any high points you would point towards that uh, helped you become, like you said, a better public official?

[Charles]: Yes. Well, I know working for uh, Home Depot uh, was, was fascinating because I was able to kind of uh, understand how developers think. Uh, so as a city planner, as a planning official uh, when I'm having meetings with them, when it comes to site plan review uh, if there's zonings that have to be made, anything uh, that comes about that's a challenge uh, between uh, you know our zoning regulations and what the, what developers are asked to do or required to do, I was able to have those type of conversations.

Uh, and so to answer your question uh, to be able to uh, see uh, multi-million dollar uh, development you know such as you know what Home Depot is putting out there, that was a major accomplishment for me. To be able to say, "hey I'm, I'm part of the reason why that development is there." And then other highlights would be when I'm coming up with uh, text amendments that kind of change the periphery of, of how a, uh, a municipality uh, looks at things such as um, the overlay district I came up with, with a few, well a few years ago, uh, which welcome being uh, sewer uh, to the community. And I'm not saying that because I'm trying to bring sewer here because I realize that Pickens County is a bedroom community. But uh, that was a huge accomplishment because what we did was bring more businesses uh, as a result of that overlay. Uh, we had strict standards for housing developments that were coming in uh, where how we want them to look um, to live, work, and play. Uh, you heard that whole adage the

live, work, and play. Uh, so I was very proud of that, that overlay uh, ordinance that, that we came up with as, as a staff.

There have been other accomplishments uh, just seeing uh, a Macy's come up or, or a Costco, or you know major developments coming into your community, uh, that those have been uh, major accomplishments on my part. But I do realize here in Pickens County we are a bedroom community, and we want to, yes there's going to be some growth, but you want to be able to manage that growth. You want to be able to uh, contain that growth as, as best as possible, also keeping in mind what the character is for this community. So, I embrace what Pickens County is and what can we do to um, make sure that we maintain the integrity, that character that that makes Pickens County what it is.

[Graham]: Right. Yeah, I think you've touched on something a lot of uh, people think about. You know as our population increases there's uh, more of a desire to uh, have more development, that's created a tension with people who want to keep it rural. So how do you navigate that tension?

[Charles]: Well, uh, I really don't see it as a challenge per se. Uh, of course I did my homework before I came to Pickens County. I know what Pickens County is and what it wants to be. Um, at the same time it's my job to educate uh, uh, it's my job to um, follow the vision. Um, it's my job to provide technical uh, uh, advice to the elected officials and, and the folks that, that make decisions and to give them what they need to make those informed decisions. But I, I don't really consider it as a challenge per se. I realize uh, what this community um, is looking uh, to be right now and in the future. So, I do look at short range plans, I look at long range plans in terms of okay how do we see Pickens County 5 years from now, 10 years from now, 20 years from now. Uh, but I really don't see a tension here, uh, tension in terms of, of um, embracing uh, the character and the traits of what Pickens County is. I, I think it's unique in uh, in, in, in some of the characteristics that that it has here. So, my job is to maintain that. My job is to, if we're going to have growth, make sure that that growth mirrors or, or is in concert with uh, what, what, what our citizens would want for their community.

[Graham]: Well, let's dig in a little bit more into that. Um, you know back in episode six Kris told us about how the code of ordinances were developed back in the late 90s looking at language from different communities and-

[Charles]: Yes.

[Graham]: A big part of what you're trying to do right now is update that.

[Charles]: Yes.

[Graham]: How, uh, how's that going and how are you going about it?

[Charles]: It's going great. Uh, I did mention in the last uh, Board of Commissioners meeting uh, uh, when I gave a presentation on bringing in uh, potential uh, new uses; uh, crypto mining and solar farm. Uh, of course it was, it was tabled because we want to make sure we have all the information we need uh, before the Commissioners actually make a decision. But that's all in an effort to um, always find ways in which we can update our ordinance, reassess our ordinances uh, re-evaluate. Uh, given the, the current trends that you see um, all over our society you want to make sure that our code of ordinances uh, stay up to date. Uh, and we've noticed that there, there are some items in our ordinances that's going to have to be re, rethought about, um, uh, reassessed, re-evaluated. Um, so it's always a good thing to, to, to look at what you have and say, "Okay, where can we improve?" Um, what are some areas that we can kind of do away with uh, now. Um, so that's, that's what we're in the process of doing right, right now in, in revamping and, and revitalizing our zoning ordinance so that it not only um, mirror what Pickens County is

and what we, where we want to go, but it's also up to date with the current trends that, that uh, we see all around us.

[Graham]: Let me pivot the conversation a little bit. Um, you've worked in wide variety of communities, some dense, some not so densely populated, some urban, some rural. Have, obviously each one has its own unique considerations, but have you found in working in zoning in all these communities there are any common uh, difficulties or challenges you come up against?

[Charles]: Well, the, the common challenge, I don't want to say difficulty, the common challenge is there's a growing kind of um, aura out there in terms of uh, the trust that the people have or, or the citizens have with government um, from federal all the way down to our local governments. And uh, in most cases there you know there's good reason for that. Um, I've always felt that um, my purpose is to educate. My purpose is to understand what uh, those, uh, those issues are, understand what the feeling is, uh, understand okay this is the reason why the public uh, is so angst about certain issues, you know make sure I ed, educate myself on that. But our job as public officials is to be a resource. Our job is to listen, our job is to provide service. Uh, so when I say to our residents that our doors are always open, that we really mean that uh, we want to be make sure that we give them the information that they need, that we're here to serve. We're not only here just to say, "no, no, no you can't do this." We're here to say, "hey uh, there may be a way you can do such, and such, and such." Uh, given what our code allows, um, making it more customer friendly. Uh, so when, when folks come in there's, there's all, there's already an apathy or an intimidation type of thing that goes on with people coming to uh, our government offices. So, we have to do the best we can to make sure that they feel comfortable, uh, make sure that they know that hey we're here to help you.

[Graham]: Right.

[Charles]: Um, our number one priority is to serve you. And so, I, I, I just think that local governments in particular we, we need to do a better job and making sure that uh, we get that message out there that we're here for you, not, not the other way around.

[Graham]: Yeah, absolutely. Um, well with your office right now, beyond the things that we have discussed, do you have any long-term or short-term goals that you're trying to accomplish, like what you mentioned with education?

[Charles]: Yes. Uh, some of the, some of the short-term goals is uh, to make sure that we could streamline some, some processes that were probably convoluted before. You know when uh, you know making sure that when people go online for example that they can get what they need online and uh, without having to always come to our office you know. Where they could fill out applications online, uh, they could pay for uh, maybe a permit online. Things of that nature that, that we, we already are beginning to have in place. But just to make it more customer friendly for people uh, and also uh, to, to make sure when we're uh, giving presentations uh, to the community and to our elected officials uh, during rezones, uh, text amendment changes, variances, what have you. That the information that we put out there is understandable, it's understandable. Uh, people, people can, can get a grasp of uh, what the goals are, uh, what we're trying to achieve as a community. Um, um and once again I mentioned that word "education." Education, education uh, to make sure that what, whatever we're putting out there that people can understand it, understand. And you may disagree with some of what we're doing but at least we can, we can be able to articulate the whys. And once people can uh, find that common ground say, "okay I might disagree with this, but I understand." Uh, that's always the goal of our staff and pretty much overall uh, County.

[Graham]: Hmm. That's um, all the questions I really had for you today, was there anything you wanted to discuss that we didn't get to?

[Charles]: No. I, I, I know you mentioned uh, in our previous conversations about uh, being an outsider.

[Graham]: Okay, yeah sure.

[Charles]: And uh, and I thought that was an interesting uh, interesting topic. And you know and um, I don't feel like an outsider. Um, I, I, I feel, I feel as though I, I um, fit very well in this community. I really uh, attribute that to my childhood um, you know. I, I, I lived in a, in a community that, that was diverse in many ways; uh, not, not just with uh, ethnicity but in terms of uh, class, in terms of uh, um, uh, how people uh, operate in their homes, what have you. It was, it was a lot of diversity. I, I was raised in Cleveland Ohio so uh, being up there you, you was you, you saw everything um, and so coming into this type of environment it may appear that I'm an outsider but uh, with all that exposure that I've had uh, throughout my life has really prepared me um, you know for, for uh, uh, assignment such as this. And uh, I really embrace this assignment of this season of, of being here in Pickens County and uh, what I can do to kind of be a change agent in some ways. Um, what I can do to make a, make the world a better place. Uh, so I, I really embraced the, I don't want to call it a challenge, but I really embraced the opportunity uh, to be in this community and to see what I can do to, to make it better.

[Graham]: Yeah, I mean I think that's part of what being a public servant is all about, is it serving uh, you know a wide variety of people in our public.

[Charles]: Exactly, exactly. That's a wonderful thing about government uh, you, you're dealing with uh, uh, people with different m- motives, uh, different personalities, different belief systems but that's what makes it all great. That whole tapestry that you can just um, appreciate and uh, just navigate your way through. So that, that's, that's how I look at life. But uh, but I'm very excited about the opportunity here in Pickens County and I look forward to the uh, coming days, months, and years, God willing.

[Graham]: Yeah, absolutely. Well on that note I think we'll close out the interview here but uh, Charles is Pickens County's new planning and development director. Thanks again for coming on this morning Charles.

[Charles]: It's been my pleasure Graham, thank you very much.

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