

Charles Kuffner

I'm speaking today with Angelica Luna-Kaufman, who is one of the candidates for Houston City Council District C in the upcoming special election. Angelica, thank you very much for speaking with me today. Let me start by asking, why are you running for this office?

Angelica Luna-Kaufman

I am running for this office because I really truly believe that right now, it is extremely important that whomever is going to represent District C, or any district for that matter in Houston, needs to be somebody who not only demonstrates proven leadership, but also somebody who has the experience to really jump in on day one, not need to get up to speed and understand how city council works. I'm the only candidate that has any local government experience. And as a public servant and somebody who's been serving the people of Harris County and Houston for quite some time, it just makes sense for me at this moment to jump into continuing to serve in this capacity.

Charles Kuffner

When you say you talk about your local government experience, you're talking about the fact that you currently are the Chief of Staff for County Judge Lina Hidalgo. So please tell me more about that, what you do, what you've accomplished. And well, let's start with that because I'm going to have a follow-up question, but let's start with that.

Angelica Luna-Kaufman

Yeah, sure. So a lot of what I do in that role, it's a behind the scenes role. It's a Chief Advisor, Chief of Staff means that I am keeping the train on the tracks day to day.

It's a lot of constituent services, a lot of constituent response, a lot of working with other departments, working and coordinating with city hall, with city official, with city departments as well. So on any given day, we are, as you know, I mean, the County Judge's office is second highest office in the state of Texas. So third largest county in the country.

So there's a lot of work getting done. We're working with other offices and our office oversees the Office of Emergency Management and Homeland Security. So we're not only activated during an actual event, but there's a lot of preparation that goes on to get us ready for hurricane season and many of the other disasters that unfortunately hit our area, like chemical leaks and things that happen around our refineries.

So very plugged in on that work, very plugged in on understanding the dynamics of our communities and the needs and why it's important for us to continue to fund. And I know I'm going into a whole different topic probably, but really understanding the day to day and the needs and why it's so important for us to continue to fund the critical services that are available to so many people. And we wanna keep them available to people.

So I think that to answer your question about what it is that I do and what the work entails, it is a lot of coordination, a lot of steering, a lot of our policy team, of a team that is overseeing and a lot of our constituent services. It's also working very closely with OEM and the city's OEM to make sure, like I said, that we're preparing for all the things that happen throughout the year. And then also the recovery aspect of that as well.

That means like having to fly to DC to fight for FEMA funding, making sure that we are in the best position possible when we're getting ready and needing to do that kind of work.

Charles Kuffner

Okay. And can you talk a little bit about the current state of city-county relations? I mean, Mayor Whitmire does not have, at least from reporting, the best relationship with your boss, Judge Hidalgo. What's your view on city-county relations? And if you were elected, what could you do to improve them?

Angelica Luna-Kaufman

So I think you see a lot of that in the headlines. And I'm not gonna say that they're besties, but what I will say is they both have big responsibilities as a county executive and as the mayor of Houston. And with those responsibilities, I think they both understand very well what their obligations are.

And even if they're not holding a press conference together for a weather event or a hurricane or a freeze, there is still real work that's being done and real coordination that's being done between the offices on the staff level. And again, that's where the work that I do is so critical because we are still having to manage all of the operations and making sure that there's not any sort of a gap. So the work is still being done.

There isn't this like, we're not, the city isn't, the mayor's office isn't freezing out the judge's office and stopping or interfering with that work any more than the county judge's office is doing that for the mayor's office. We all know that we have big jobs and we know the importance of those jobs. So I don't see that.

I hear what you're saying though, as far as the relationship with the mayor, is that something that possibly would be passed on to me? Would he maybe not wanna work as closely with me? I, again, going back to what I said, I do believe that people who hold these kinds of positions and aren't elected to do so understand the much larger aspect of it. And I don't believe that that is something that would get in the way of my work on city council.

Charles Kuffner

Oftentimes when I talk to certainly mayoral candidates, but in general candidates for city office, there's talk about ways in which the city and county could work together and maybe combine some offices. They have separate offices for parks and for libraries and so on and so forth, excuse me. So, realistically, what opportunities do you see for possible consolidation of services between county and city?

And I know that's not something within your purview as a city council member, that's more of a mayoral thing, but I'm still curious as to your thoughts on it. Partly also because oftentimes when we talk about this, it's talked about in terms of savings in the budget, which I'll get to in more detail on another question, but that's obviously a consideration. So what do you see on that?

Angelica Luna-Kaufman

So, yes, to exactly what you're saying. And that is work that is being done. We just, and I have to tie it back to the budget because that's where it's relevant.

The budget cycle that we just went through and when we had to tighten the belt, find as many inefficiencies as possible, which I believe is just a talking point, but that's a whole nother deal. We can get to that when we talk about budget. But realistically going line by line, working with different departments, public health is a great example.

When we were seeing that there was a lot of overlap with wastewater, when we're doing our wastewater reporting and monitoring around COVID and different diseases, and it's a great tool, but there was a lot of overlap. So we're now working more closely with the city as a result of this work where we're not, because we were duplicating in many ways. So we are looking and we have looked and there were things that were identified in the last budget cycle on how we can work more closely together to where we can free up some funds, free up some resources, free up some workforce to work on other things as a result.

So I'm proud of the work that we've done there. There's definitely more opportunity to continue to do that work. And yes, absolutely, to all of that, to when it comes to, we had a situation when we got hit with the chemical leak out in Deer Park in 2024, where we had a situation where we had a staffing issue with some of the people that were going out to do some of the pollution monitoring.

Because as soon as anything happens like this, immediately our fire marshal's office, our hazmat gets involved and we need to be able to monitor as much of the air and the water as possible. So when we weren't able to meet that need, immediately we're able to coordinate with the city to make sure that, again, that there aren't any gaps there. I believe that coordination is how we continue to, how we continue to meet the needs that continue to grow.

And as we keep getting hit by, unfortunately, disasters or if we have some sort of a chemical situation again. So that coordination is happening and I would always continue to look for other ways that we can do that and build those partnerships.

Charles Kuffner

Okay, let's broaden it out to the budget question. Mayor Whitmire has put a lot of effort into dealing with the city's financial situation, mostly on the cost side. He's reduced the city's workforce, he's cut the budget to different departments.

He has also talked a bit more recently about having dealt with what he called inefficiencies and waste. He was open to ideas to increase the city's revenue since there's still a significant gap. And that would

largely mean dealing with the revenue cap and raising property tax rates and also possibly implementing a garbage fee.

So I would like to know from your perspective, what's your view on the work the mayor has done towards dealing with the city's finances and what would you support or advocate as a member of city council for the work that still needs to be done?

Angelica Luna-Kaufman

So you're right, you can only DOGE so much, right? You remember the DOGE from the federal government? And before you end up at a point which I know the city's in the same situation where you're basically robbing from Peter to pay Paul, something has to always give.

You cannot rely on pulling from important funding that's set aside for your rainy day fund and other things that you know are going to happen in our region. I would continue to fight and advocate to protect that essential funding so it isn't a source and something that the mayor feels that he can tap into. It needs to, if it's for a flood drainage project or I mean, a flood project or a drainage project or set aside in case of a disaster, I feel very strongly about making sure that none of that is tapped into to pay for other things.

Going back to the situation around the revenue cap and taxes, I do think that there is an opportunity for us to relook at bonds, relook at different ways that we can generate some revenue. I also know that we have FIFA World Cup that's coming this year and I know that a lot of that revenue that's generated goes to the hotel tax and whatnot and some of that also goes to different assets. Everybody wants their piece of it, but there is revenue and even though it's windfall revenue that comes from that.

So I think making sure that whatever, whenever we're in a situation like that, that we already have potential plans or proposals in place on things that are important that we wanna fund with that money. I think another aspect is looking at the TIRZ, looking to see the projects, the timeline, where we are with some of that, look to see if there's an opportunity there for us to possibly relook at the budgeting around it. But at the end of the day, we all know the reality is that the population of Houston continues to grow in this entire region.

We know that critical services will have to get cut because we only have so much money coming in. And I think that's when I, for one, do not like to hear higher taxes, but I do think that that's when you can talk about things like a garbage fee and talk to people in communities. But I believe all this has to happen with community input.

And I think that if you have like District C, for example, different constituents that I've spoken to in this area are very open to the idea of a garbage fee, an additional fee to make sure that these services continue to get handled. Again, District C is in a bit of a different situation. I believe it's 120% higher household income than the city of Houston.

So I think if we do implement something like that, then we have to look at it and see where certain communities, vulnerable communities, like seniors or people in a certain income level could opt out of that garbage fee. Also, I think that if you build proposals and plans that are very transparent, a penny tax,

for example, and people know exactly what it is that it may go towards, take it to the voters, let them decide. I believe that it is not up to city council to make the decision on how this tax dollars are going to get spent.

If the public wants to see a certain service not cut because of the situation with our budget, then we need to give them the opportunity to make that decision. And at that point, I would be supportive of taking something like that to the voters.

Charles Kuffner

Okay. City has a strong mayor set up in which the mayor generally controls what is on the agenda for city council. However, recently there was a referendum passed that allowed city council members to put an item on the agenda if they get three members to support it.

A recent example that didn't make it. And there haven't been that many attempts so far, successful attempts by council members to put something on the agenda, but there was one by now former council member Plummer to put an item on regarding the HPD relationship with ICE, but she didn't get a third person to sign onto it before she rolled off of council. So my question to you is, how would you, what will be your approach to using that tool as a way to put forth ideas that you support that maybe aren't getting the attention that you want from the mayor? And how much, what's your strategy for that? How much do you plan to use that?

Angelica Luna-Kaufman

Yeah, and I mean, exactly that. It has to be a strategy. There needs to be some real consensus building. And I think a lot of that begins with community input. I believe that if it's something that it's a need out in the community, the community really wants to see, it's most likely not just one district. And I think that's where you're able to get some buy-in and build the coalition with other council members.

And I know I keep falling back and saying, "in the county," but as you know, even though we are a majority democratic commissioners core, many times we're not able to get stuff pushed, we can get out, we're outvoted. But even before we are outvoted, there is still behind the scenes, a lot of the work that I'm doing and my office is doing, working with the other offices to make sure that we have some support. And we're working with data, we're working with research to make sure that the other people that we want on our side, or that we feel that it would benefit their districts as well to get involved in this initiative or whatever the agenda item may be.

And they see the benefit and why it's important to invest in it or support it. And that's how you build that coalition. So I would continue to do that with the work that I would do in city council as well.

I think it's about making sure that it's a broader benefit. I think the way that you're gonna do that is with the community involvement, but then also with the research, with the data, showing that this is a model that maybe has been used in another city. These are the results.

Is this why it's important for us to do this here? And then the other part of it is the mayor's office. Yes, I mean, I hear what you're saying about the mayor, but the mayor has an entire team, just like Judge Hidalgo has an entire team behind her.

And somebody like me, chief of staff and chief advisor, who is working to pull all of these things together to help advise and give the most updated information and accurate information to help that person make the decision. And I believe knowing how to do that as someone who it's a big part of my job is working in negotiating and understanding all the different angles and aspects of these situations, knowing how to have those conversations with people in the mayor's office ahead of council meetings and before things even get developed into an agenda item, I think it's gonna be very important. So that would be my plan is the strategy, making sure there's a clear strategy in place and then making sure that you're able to build the consensus built on real data, built on community input and built on real benefit. And I think that with that kind of a plan, we'll be able to get some things moving forward.

Charles Kuffner

Okay, this election is to name a successor to council member Abbie Kamen, who is now the Democratic nominee for Harris County judge. She'll be stepping down after someone wins this race. How would you evaluate council member Kamen's time in office and how would you be like her or not like her if you are the next council member?

Angelica Luna-Kaufman

She's very loved, I will say that. I've been out and about talking to a lot of people over the past few months and most of the people, they think very highly of her. One of the things I hear quite often is she's extremely responsive.

And I believe that the reason that she's so responsive is because this is her full-time job. So she isn't just doing this when she's preparing for council meetings. She is always thinking through and having conversations.

And if not her directly, then her team is in some sort of communication with the civic neighborhood presidents, the super neighborhood presidents. She's very much aware of what the needs are in her community on any given day. And because of that, she's able to advocate in the way that she needs to advocate and push for the policies that are important.

So I believe in that way, because of the work that I do every day, 50, 60 hours a week, many times, it would be in a very similar manner. This also would be a full-time job for me. I've been a public servant for quite some time and I don't see how you're able to really balance this with any other competing priority. I think that that's why Abbie has been so successful. And I would like to continue with that same kind of approach.

What I think, I have not heard a whole lot of negative about Abby Kamen. I think that's why she's so popular and why she's most likely will be our next County Attorney in Harris County because of it, because of the work she's done and her service that has been very, she's been very, she's accomplished a

lot while in office. And I know there are big shoes to fill and why I feel like I'm the best position to continue her work and to create my own accomplishments as well, or to accomplish my own things as well in the position.

Charles Kuffner

And similarly, how would you evaluate Mayor Whitmire in his time in office? We've talked about city-county relations, but I wanna know, what do you think of how Mayor Whitmire has done and how would you see your relationship with him as a member of council?

Angelica Luna-Kaufman

So I think because of my unique position, right? I think because I see, I understand the weight of somebody in a position like the mayor. And I understand that he isn't making these decisions in a vacuum.

And I understand the responsibility that he's under. I, there are things that I obviously feel that he could do better. I don't love the calling back and the stopping of projects once they've been started, just because I've experienced that. And we've had to figure out how to like work around it with some of our flood control projects and the amount of money that is wasted and time and the frustration in the communities. It's just, it's nerve wracking and it shouldn't happen. That should absolutely not happen.

I believe that he could definitely be better in that aspect when he is making those kinds of decisions. I also do think though that there is common ground there. I think that when you are talking to the mayor about, you know, safer streets, and you're talking about situations with traffic and you wanna make things easier for not just pedestrians, but also for drivers.

I think that the common ground there is, it's about public safety. And I think that's something that the mayor can get behind. And I believe that he understands the different aspects that contribute to public safety. And I think in that area and finding those spaces, I would be able to work with him on.

However, if we have different opinions or values on, or different positions on things, I will push back. I have, in my experience in the work that I've done, not just in the county judge's office, but also, which I haven't even mentioned, but I have had the privilege of getting to work with the late Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee.

And when you talk about political courage, I don't, it was like a masterclass in that, working alongside her. So I have had the privilege of getting to work with some very strong people who not only demonstrate that political courage, but know that anytime that they're standing up and advocating that it isn't about them, it's much broader, and it's about the people that you're representing. And I know that I can do that well. And I believe that even though the mayor will get pushback from me on issues, I believe that he would still respect why I'm doing it.

Charles Kuffner

All right. Well, in order to do it, you first have to get elected. And there's seven people in this race to be the next council member in District C. So when people go to vote, why should they vote for you and not one of the other people running?

Angelica Luna-Kaufman

So this is going to be a really short term. It ends at the end of this year. People are going to have to start campaigning again at the end of- At the end of next year, right?

Charles Kuffner

At the end of next year, right? 27?

Charles Kuffner

At the end of, yes, at the end of 2027. Thank you. But the filing will be- Yeah, the filing will be soon. So it's a really short term, and I think it's going to be very difficult to, I'm not, look, everybody running, I feel like we're very, very like-minded. I feel that we are pretty progressive in the way that we approach things.

But what really sets me apart is the experience. And it isn't, and I know, I feel like a broken record many times when I'm saying this, but just knowing, because of that experience and knowing how difficult it can be to get up to speed, even with the background that I had prior to moving into local government, it took me a while to really kind of figure it out, to understand the processes and the pitfalls. And you really need to know what that dynamic is about.

And I think it may take a year before somebody is able to get there. And I think, especially right now, budget season's already started for this city. Their fiscal cycle starts in July.

We know this is going to go into a runoff, so most likely we're not going to be in office until maybe around June. And that's not a lot of time. And some of the decisions that are being made this year are going to impact this region for a decade.

So there's too much at stake. I feel that this process, as much as I love campaigning, it feels very much like the longest job interview of my entire life. And I'm very proud of the work that I've done. And I feel like my resume speaks for itself. And I feel that the people in District C and in the city of Houston deserve to have somebody that from day one will be able to have the impact that they need.

Charles Kuffner

All right, Angelica Luna-Kaufman, thank you very much for speaking with me today.