

Charles Kuffner

Speaking today with Nick Hellyar, who is one of the candidates in the special election for Houston City Council District C. Nick, thank you for talking with me today. Please tell me why you're running for this office.

Nick Hellyar

Yeah, hey Charles, appreciate you having me. I'm running for this office because I started as a young Democratic precinct chair and staffer at City Hall. That's where I started my political career when I was younger. And what I realized is that local politics and the smaller you get into the political world, the more I feel like you can make a difference in everybody's lives. They say all politics is local. And I started as a constituent services manager in a district office.

So anytime somebody's trash didn't get picked up or there was an issue in their neighborhood or community, they would contact our office and I was the one that would help them out to get things solved. And I really saw what an amazing difference it made in people's lives. Recently, I served as chief of staff to an at-large council member on an interim basis while she had her chief of staff go down with a severe illness. And it just kind of reinvigorated my love for city politics.

And I just want to get back out there and use my knowledge of the city and how the city works to ensure that District C residents get an advocate at city council that can actually get things done for them.

Charles Kuffner

And you have run for city council before two times, I believe. What would you say you learned from those experiences?

Nick Hellyar

Yeah, I ran at-large two times. It was tough. I think the first time I came in third in a very large field and then last time made the runoff but didn't make it in.

I think it's relationship building and people like Annise Parker went on her third try. And this is difficult. Campaigning is not fun. It's not easy. It's brutal. It takes up time out of your life and family and friends are not in a good situation when a loved one is running.

So it's tough. And I just kind of learned how to navigate that, how to navigate campaigns. I grew up as a staffer on campaigns as well. So I've been through the battles over time. But I think a district race is much different than an at-large race. At-large is citywide. You're at the whim of the mayor's race. The drop-off between somebody going to vote for mayor and the at-large races is very large.

So in a city of 2.3, 2.4 million, you cannot raise enough money as an at-large candidate to make much of a difference. And in a district race, you can. And you can actually make a difference in the race with the amount of doors you knock on, the people you speak to. So I think it's just a clear difference between an at-large and a district race. And I'm excited this time to take this up.

Charles Kuffner

In times when you're not working as a staffer to a city council member, you work in real estate. Obviously, housing issues and housing costs are a concern. Housing availability is a concern for a lot of people. How would you relate your experience in the real estate market to deal with issues concerning housing in the city of Houston?

Nick Hellyar

Yeah, I started a real estate company about 15 years ago. I do a lot of property management and apartment locating. And that kind of, I think, is going to be a massive help for me on city council.

I see how the rental prices have skyrocketed since COVID. I see absentee landlords and slumlords running giant properties. There's one called Life at Jackson Square in the Meyerland area. So I see how this affects people on a daily basis. And I think that goes to what I was saying earlier, where this job can actually affect people when it comes to their daily lives.

There's two prongs that you can take on this. One is holding bad actors to account, which is what we're trying to do with the apartment ordinance that was started at City Hall. I'd love to get on the housing committee. I think this issue in Meyerland with the property down there is really, really affecting the quality of life of the neighbors. And I'd love to be a part of an apartment ordinance that actually has some teeth for bad actors.

And the second one is building, right? Regulations on permitting and lot setbacks and minimum lot sizes and building ADUs, like garage apartments in the backyard.

The last restrictions that we can get and regulations to help improve the amount of houses that are coming on the market, the lower the costs are going to be. And having worked in the real estate market, that's something I really want to focus on.

Charles Kuffner

When you refer to the apartment ordinance, you're talking about the one that was being championed by former CM Letitia Plummer or something else?

Nick Hellyar

Yes, that's the one. It's now actually getting some momentum. And I think it's something that that housing complex down there during the last freeze had about 50% of its units without heating.

So this is a life and death situation. And this is an out of state landlord. There's no reason that people from New York City should be buying up properties in Houston, neglecting them and having Houstonians freezing in the middle of winter. It's unacceptable. So I'd like to see that ordinance passed with a little bit of teeth to it.

Charles Kuffner

Okay. You also talk on your website about managing properties better for the city as a way of contributing towards the city's financial bottom line to reduce the deficit, bring in more money. I mean, that's something when I talk to people about the budget situation in the city, that's something that hasn't come up very much.

The city has sold properties in the past as sort of one time infusions of cash to bridge budget gaps. But you're talking about something a bit more long term. Tell me about what you have in mind here and how much of an impact it could have.

Nick Hellyar

Yeah, I think so. This is just something kind of being in the real estate world, what you see is when there's a large portfolio of properties and leases like the city of Houston has, if it's managed correctly, this is something where we can save money. I think in this budget process, we are looking at a \$226 million deficit.

I'm really proud to be endorsed by Councilmember Sally Alcorn, who is chair of Budget and Fiscal Affairs Committee, who runs the budget cycle for Council. So and I'm the only person in this race who's ever worked on city budgets before. So kind of understanding that process and seeing where we can raise a little bit more money with what we have.

You know, there's leases that we have on the books that can be rewritten. There's buildings that aren't being used to their highest and best uses. You know, there's places where we can consolidate people in city buildings and maybe lease out some of that space to earn some revenue.

And then, you know, the one time purchase or sales of kind of these ghost lots where nothing's getting done. One, it'll save on maintenance, which is continuing budget savings. And two, it would give us a cash infusion.

So I'm looking more at the management of it, not using sale of property to bring in the money, but more so rethinking how we, as a city, use the assets that we have in our real estate portfolio to make money where we can continue to make money and create a new revenue stream. It's something I'm proud to be endorsed by former Controller Chris Brown and worked with him kind of on the minutiae of this and really excited to bring that to City Hall, especially with the budget.

Charles Kuffner

Well, as long as we're talking about the budget, I mean, obviously, Mayor Whitmire spent a lot of time and effort in his tenure so far on dealing with budget issues. He has made a lot of cuts. A lot of the city's workforce has been reduced. You know, the civilian workforce anyway.

You know, he has only barely begun to talk about new revenue sources, which often, which usually means, you know, dealing with the revenue cap to allow for more property tax income and also possibly a trash fee because there's, you know, there's been longstanding issues with solid waste. So how do you

evaluate the mayor's efforts to deal with the city's finances and where do you stand on issues like the methods we've talked about for raising revenue?

Nick Hellyar

Yeah, I think this is, you know, having worked on budgets before, no mayor has ever come to the council and said, hey, good news, we've got a giant surplus and we don't know what to do with it. There's always going to be a deficit when you head into budget season. So it's something that I have worked on in the past and I'm looking forward to.

The person that wins this seat is going to be sworn into office probably in early May, which is going to be the right at the beginning of the city budget process. So it is so important that we elect somebody who understands the process and can get to work and advocate for District C right away. I do commend the mayor on kind of pushing back on council and the voices from the outside that said, you know, we need to raise taxes, we need a trash fee, we need, you know, other types of fees.

What he said first was, hey, let me get in there, we'll do a forensic audit by Ernst & Young, we'll figure out where the savings can be had and efficiencies are to be had, and then we'll go from there. And that's what he's done. So after the EY report, I think it was the first time that city's ever done anything like this. This is something that businesses do all the time. And so I think he was able to find some spending there. But I do think we've gotten to the point where now we've cut everything that we need to cut and we need to think about new revenue streams.

Council Member Alcorn has spoken repeatedly that we, like this cycle, we didn't even hit, we didn't even bump up against the revenue cap. So I think when voters voted for the revenue cap, they at least expected the city to bring in as much money as they possibly could under the revenue cap. So I think there's about \$50 million right there that we should have, or that we can go grab next cycle.

In Bill White's administration, he was able to get public safety to be used, be considered outside of the revenue cap. That's about \$90 million. There's some question if we're using that exemption to its fullest extent.

And then why can't we do something like this with parks, right? So we've exempted public safety from the revenue cap from a vote. Why can't we put it to the voters to exempt something like the park system, right?

If we can take that out of the revenue cap, that's the more money that we can make. Making sure TIRZes are being used to their full extent, they're outside of the revenue cap. I think there's some stuff that we can do. It's going to take a lot of people down at City Hall. We're going to get pushback, but we need to be smart about this. Sometimes you got to make tough decisions, like a trash fee.

Every major city in Texas has one, and we're severely underfunded on what we're spending currently on solid waste. But what I think I bring to the table is somebody who understands the process, understands the tools in our tool belt that can get this done, and ensure that District C has an advocate that's going to go down there, make sure that District C gets the resources from the budget that it deserves, but also is

fiscally responsible and understands the budget process, because we don't want to be spending people's tax dollars when we don't need to.

Charles Kuffner

District C has been the site, the center of a number of disagreements between the mayor and current council member and a number of residents over some infrastructure and transportation projects. Montrose Boulevard, North Shepherd Durham, and now West Alabama. There have been studies done and a plan put together on all of those locations for something that was more sidewalk, pedestrian, bicyclist-friendly.

The mayor objected to parts of that and made some changes, certainly to the Montrose plan, and is attempting to do so with the West Alabama plan. That one's currently still being argued. Where do you stand on this, and how would you attempt to try to balance the needs or the desires of people who both want that kind of development and the people who object to it?

Nick Hellyar

Yeah, I think, again, this goes back to all politics is local, right? There's going to be people on all sides of issues, and we've gotten this question repeatedly, is how do you advocate for one side or the other? Well, you know, I think we can advocate for both sides at the same time, right?

I think the job of a district council member is to listen to the constituents, figure out what they want, and go advocate for them at City Hall. There are people advocating for, you know, not cutting down the trees on Montrose, and there's people that are advocating for bike lanes. So I think what this district council member needs to do is ensure that everybody is heard.

I've worked in council offices where there's been big fights like this, and there's always going to be fights like this, but as Houstonians, I think it's a great, you know, we have a great system in place, and we all want a better city. We all want a walkable and bikeable neighborhood, and I think that we can come to an agreement and a consensus together. We're not all going to get what we want, and that's just the bottom line.

The people that want bike lanes aren't going to get exactly what they want, and the people that want wider streets aren't going to get what they want. So we're going to need to come together, and I think having worked in these offices on tough issues in the past, this is something that I can do, and hear all sides of every argument, you know, but we do live in a mayor strong form of government, and the last plans were brought in by the previous administration. The current administration didn't like them and changed them, and having worked under three administrations and having worked for Annise Parker, you know, you have to understand the process.

You have to understand how each administration works and try and get things done to advocate for District C. So my 100% focus is going to be on ensuring that the residents of District C have a voice and advocate, and advocate for them down at City Hall, and I think I have that experience.

Charles Kuffner

Well, you're right. This is a strong mayor system, but we recently passed a proposition that allows three city council members to put an item on the agenda if they, you know, work together on it. You know, one place that this has come up, I didn't quite make it there, but had to do with the HBD's policies regarding ICE and, you know, how it would deal with ICE.

So kind of a two-part question for you, you know, to what extent would you use this tool that city council members have to put items on the agenda where the mayor isn't doing it, and where do you stand on, you know, the city's, how HPD interacts with ICE?

Nick Hellyar

Yeah, I think these are two really big questions here. So when it comes to Prop A, I think it's always great when elected officials or an elective body have a check and balance on another branch, and I think this just gives more, I'll keep saying it, tools in the toolbox to council members to get things done. You know, I think that in the administrations that I've worked in, if the majority of council members usually have an idea that they want to see get pushed forward, and they go to the administration, whoever it is, with a reasonable argument, it's probably going to get put on the agenda.

I can't remember many times where there was an uproar from city council that an administration didn't listen to, but this allows that to go through. Now, that, whatever you put forward in Prop A still needs to be legal, and it needs to go through the process of ensuring that, you know, we can't make ordinances and change codes that are illegal are going to get knocked down in court. So, you know, you still have to go through the process.

I think it is, we actually used to have not a similar process, but a kind of a workaround wonky process where you could get things on the agenda. This just makes it much easier. So, what I would do first with any administration is go to the community first, figure out what the issue is, then go to my colleagues on council and try and build support, then go to the mayor, see if it's something that he'll work with, and if not, then we'll go to Prop A.

So, I have no problem going and using Prop A if the residents of District C are really adamant about something. So, I'm excited to see it be used since Houstonians voted in. So, that's an exciting new thing that council members can use.

As far as ICE is concerned, I do think this is, you know, one of the biggest civil rights issues that we're going to run up to or run up against in our lifetime. Now, with this administration, it seems like every day there's a new crisis or a new thing that we're dealing with, but having grown up and working in Latino politics on the east side of Houston for Council Member James Rodriguez and State Representative Carol Alvarado as her district director before she was a state senator, I saw firsthand how these issues affect our undocumented neighbors in Houston, and there's two issues that I think that are really important to speak about. One is housing. We will go back, I'll keep going back to housing and ensuring that people have a quality place to live, but if we have basically slumlords that know that one of their residents is undocumented, which they do understand because, you know, as a property manager, I know that you

have to go through the process of vetting your tenants, and, you know, if a slumlord knows that they have somebody that's undocumented, they don't have to fix the hot water, they don't have to fix the A.C. in the summer, they don't need to keep the house up to a livable place because they know that their tenants that are undocumented can't go complain. So that's a huge issue that the undocumented community is facing.

And then when it comes to public safety, you know, HPD has to have faith in it, in the community, in order to work, right? So if we have a disconnect between HPD and a community, they're not going to report crimes. You know, currently people that are undocumented are being preyed upon because they know that these predators understand that they can't go to the police to report these crimes, and they know that when they are terrorizing a neighborhood that people aren't going to speak up because they're worried about getting deported. So there's multiple prongs multiple issues that this whole situation creates.

And I think, you know, look, SB4 is the law of the land. We need to do as little as possible to ensure that law enforcement is not breaking the law. But I don't think HPD wants to deal with this issue. The officers that I've spoken to, that I've worked with over the years, they are already understaffed and overworked. And adding something that they need to worry about is not something they want to do. They want to catch bad guys, you know, break-ins and robberies and shootings and murders and rapes.

That's what they signed up for. And I don't think that they want this either. But what we need to do is be clear as a city with the orders to HPD on how they need to act. But it's just an issue that I've seen firsthand and would love to go down to City Hall and help Houstonians with.

Charles Kuffner

Okay. You've talked a lot about what the mayor does, and I'd like to hear your overall impression of Mayor Whitmire in his first term. You know, what's your evaluation of him?

Nick Hellyar

Yeah, like I said, having worked under three administrations, it is a tough job. It is. It is not easy being the CEO and mayor of the city of Houston. You know, we're the largest city in Texas that doesn't have a city manager. We're the largest city, but we're an extremely large city not to have a city manager. And it's a tough job.

You know, I agree with the mayor on some issues and not on others. But again, this is, you know, it's kind of not up to me to judge what he's doing. What my job as a district council member to do is advocate for the residents of District C.

I do agree with some things that he's done, you know, when it comes to public safety. One of the biggest issues that we've always had in District C were the nuisance bars on Washington Avenue. And day one, he was out there cracking down, and the neighbors over there have been begging for years and years and years for a crackdown on those bars.

It was just a, you know, huge quality of life issue. So I'm extremely happy that their issue has been heard and worked on. But there's issues like some infrastructure, bike lanes that were ripped up after they were built that I don't agree with them on. But you know, that's how governing goes. That's how life goes. That's how families go. That's how friendship goes, right? You're not going to get everything you want all the time. But what you do need to do is have a good working relationship. And I think that's something I can do. I can do with this mayor.

Charles Kuffner

And this election is to succeed Councilmember Abbie Kamin, who is now the Democratic nominee for Harris County Attorney. She will step down when someone is elected. How do you evaluate her time in office? And how would you be like her or not like her if you are elected?

Nick Hellyar

Yeah, I think Councilmember Kamin has done a good job. I think her work on the previously mentioned life at Jackson Square has been something that we can really point to. And again, I can step in day one and continue exactly what she's done in that area on that project trying to hold account these out-of-state slumlords that are coming into Houston and buying up major properties and then, you know, letting the services lapse at them.

So I commend her on that. And I can step in day one and continue the fight that she's done there and in other areas around the city because I don't need on-the-job training. I've done this before. I've done this work. I love this work. I know the community leaders.

I know the issues in the neighborhoods. And I can step in day one and continue that fight that Councilmember Kamin's been doing for the last six years and wish her nothing but the best in her run for county attorney.

Charles Kuffner

Well, I always can close by asking why people should vote for you and not for the other candidates. You've kind of been making that pitch all along, but let's sum it up. When people go to vote in this election, there's seven candidates running. Why should they vote for you and not one of the other people?

Nick Hellyar

Yeah, I see this position as a job more so than a political office, right? If you're going to be a State Rep, you're going to be one of 150. If you're going to be a member of Congress in the House of Representatives, you're going to be one of 435.

And, you know, while that is great work, you know, you don't see change immediately. And, you know, you're one of many. A district Councilmember, this is a job.

This is a daily, you know, I would say nine to five, but it's not. It's more of a seven to 830 kind of thing, you know. This is 13, 14, 15-hour days, 60 hours a week. And we need somebody that understands how the city works to effectively advocate for District C residents. And I've done the work. I love the work.

I have the relationships. You know, this is about getting trash picked up on time. This is about advocating for safe street crossings and more pedestrian infrastructure.

This is about advocating against slumlords coming in from out of town to, you know, put these bad actors in our neighborhoods. And while we are all Democrats running, I think my experience 100% puts me in a better place day one to begin this. If you look at the Councilmember that I worked for first was Councilmember James Rodriguez.

He was chief of staff to Carol Alvarado when she was termed out. And I saw him go in there day one. He had the relationships with the department directors like I do.

You know, I have a relationship with the mayor's staff. I have a relationship with the mayor. I have a relationship with the neighborhood leaders and super neighborhood presidents and our longtime bloggers who hold us to account. You know, I know this work. I love this work. I know how to get it done. And I just hope that I can advocate effectively for my neighbors and hope I can count on their vote.

Charles Kuffner

All right. Nick Hellyar, thank you very much for speaking with me today.

Nick Hellyar

Thanks, Charles.