City of Asheville
City Council Vacancy Application Form

Your name: Robert Elijah Thomas Jr. Home Phone #: (828)989-0773

Street Address: 2200 Kensington Place Apt F City: Asheville Zip Code: 28803

Mailing Address (if different): _____

Employer: Racial Justice Coalition of Asheville

Position: Community Liaison Office Phone # _____

Resident of City of Asheville (required): ● Yes ☐ No

Registered Voter in the City of Asheville (required): ● Yes ☐ No

Race: Black Sex: Male Age: 33

Residence location (check one) Central ____ North ● South ____ East ____ West ____

Additional Information Required:

1. Resume
2. ½ page response to the essay questions below: (not attached)

eSigned via SeamlessDocs.com
Robert Elijah Thomas Jr
Key: 6d5995faaf5d01d33d35162fad62a4c3f

Applicant Signature
Date: 08/03/2020

All applications and attachments must be
Returned by **Noon, Thursday, August 20**, 2020 to:

Maggie Burleson, City Clerk
PO Box 7148
Asheville, NC 28802
Email: mburleson@ashevillenc.gov
Phone: 828-259-5601

Robert Elijah Thomas Jr.
2200 Kensington Place apt. f Asheville, N.C. 28803
828-989-0773
Robthomas52587@gmail.com

| Requested Candidate Attributes: | Examples of My Attributes |
|---|---|
| • Lived experience that reflects the mission of the Racial Justice Coalition | • Lived through the "system" and know the areas that need correction, and possess ideas to correct them<br>• Understand how important racial equity is when it comes to community-police relations |
| • Strong commitment and connection to communities of color | • Native of Asheville, born and raised here<br>• Personally know many residents in impoverished neighborhoods in Asheville |
| • Trusted member of the community with an understanding of the history and legacy of Asheville | • My list of references show that many people of my community and demographic trust me in this future job position<br>• Knowledgeable of the social climate before urban renewal, up until what is currently going on now with the biases of the justice system |
| • Local or long-term resident from Asheville or Buncombe County | • Grew up and spent my whole life in Asheville, North Carolina, and possess deep familial roots here |
| • Self-starter/self-motivated, ability to prioritize and be transparent in work | • Possess a business consulting and editing LLC, with my wife, which we started and produced revenue from, while working full time jobs, and raising a family |
| • Strong work ethic | • Currently average about 60 hours a week of work time, being a commercial driver<br>• Invest another 10 hours a week to side business ventures when at home |
| • Experience in community outreach and grassroots organizing | • Asheville Native<br>• Ability to connect with others and forge strong relationships |
| • Former incarceration not a barrier for the right candidate | • Although formerly incarcerated, I look at it as a strength. How can you fully understand something without experiencing it? |
| • Deep commitment to equity and justice including, but not limited to racial, gender and economic justice | • My commitment to all people being treated equally stem from my ambition to create a more equitable environment for our children and generations to come. They own the future. |
| • Understanding of LGBTQIA and its racial intersections, and police relationship to this community | • True impartiality equates to everyone being treated equal. Race, religion, gender, sexual preference or any other category shouldn't be allowed to determine how a person is respected. |
| Skills: (ideal candidate will possess these skills or be willing to be mentored to learn them) | |
| ○ Strong interpersonal and facilitation skills | ○ Understand both theoretical and practical concepts, Knowledge-sharing, active listening, emphasis on teamwork and encourage open communication to achieve mutual understanding |
| • Ability to manage crisis communications in conjunction with Racial Justice Coalition's Crisis Lead Team | • Exceptionally keen and alert, displays consistent, logical and orderly thinking, solution-based approaches, effectively resolve conflicts internally and externally |

| | |
|---|---|
| ○ Willingness to actively engage with law enforcement to promote RJC's vision and mission | ○ Understand the importance of collaboration, community advocate, ability to be serve as a liaison between the community and law enforcement |
| • Familiarity with word processing, spreadsheets, and presentation software | • Highly organized, analytical and IT-competent (Proficient in Microsoft and Google Suite) |

**Work History:**

Dish-room Technician, Mission Hospital, Asheville, N.C.,
Maintenance Technician, Housing Authority of Asheville, Asheville, N.C.
Commercial Driver, Houser Logistics, Vale, N.C.
Community Liaison, Racial Justice Coalition, Asheville, N.C. -Current Role

**Education:**

High school diploma, Asheville High, 2005

**References:**

Melissa Reed
mreed@eckerd.org
(828)641-1185

Timothy Splain (Retired Law Enforcement)
tim_b_splain@yahoo.com
(828)774-8189

David Greenson
davidgreenson@gmail.com
(718)809-2132

**The following questions may be answered directly on this form, or responses uploaded as attachments upon form submission.**

1. **With the death of George Floyd the country was thrust into a new civil rights movement. Policing in America was scrutinized even more and even here locally reparations were passed. Please explain if you believe that systemic racism and oppression exist, if yes do you or do you not support reparations and what it all means in the context of equity and Inclusion.**

I know that systemic racism and oppression exist. Furthermore, I also know that all systems on which this country was built, intersect with systemic racism, whether it be knowingly or unknowingly; they are all interwoven. If we resolved the issues of poverty, would we see a decrease in crime? If we solved the issues of crime, would we need a criminal justice system? If we solved the issues of the opportunity/achievement gap in our school systems, would we need to fund positions related to behavioral management/discipline in school? The point that I am trying to make is that all of our systems are intertwined and the reason that I believe that we are still debating whether or not systemic racism and oppression exist is because so many systems depend heavily on the existence of both. To eradicate systemic racism and oppression, we'd have to first acknowledge that they exist, that other systems thrive because they exist, acknowledge that many, too many lives to count, have been destroyed because they exist and dismantle and rebuild all systems strategically so as to not rebuild the same "monster" in new attire.
As far as reparations are concerned, I absolutely support reparations. If we were to breakdown the word reparations, it truly means to make amends for a wrong that was done; to repair and restore. Again, I say, the first step to repairing something that has been damaged is to first acknowledge one's role and apologize for the wrong that was done. The next step is embedding accountability in the process from the very beginning so that no further harm will be done. The next step is restoration; returning, reinvesting, and revisioning what was, could have been and should be if the harm would have never taken place. The most important step, in my opinion, is allowing those that were most impacted by the harm done, to lead the healing and reconciliation process. Reparations should not be mistaken as charity nor should it be initiated with the savior complex in mind. Remember, if the harm had not occured, there would be no need for repair.
I would be remiss if I didn't address the on-going opposing conversation related to reparations. I think it is obvious that most of the physical beings that suffered first hand because of slavery, gentrification, Jim Crow, redlining, convict camps, segregation etc. may not be alive anymore just as those who committed those physical acts of atrocity through force, laws, policies, practices and or blatant discrimination may also not be living anymore. What has transcended through time though are the benefits or disparities of said practices, laws, force and discrimination and where we landed in today's "monopoly game" is directly tied to the history; with the major deciding factor being "race".
So, sure, nobody alive today, owned enslaved people but was the generational wealth that has been passed down over the centuries in their family built off of the backs of enslaved people? I guess since not all enslaved people were

2. **Do you support Black Asheville Demands call for defunding the APD by 50%? If no, please explain why and if yes, what sort of timeline do you envision to reach that goal?**

My stance on the call for defunding the Asheville Police Department by 50% is much deeper than a simple yes or no. Before I give you my answer, I'd like to first give you the background on my knowledge of policing, not just in Asheville but all over the country. Policing in America started as a way of controlling/patrolling enslaved people, thus the term "Slave Patrol. As the systems in this country evolved so did policing. The model of policing as we know it in America is centered around power and control coupled with laws and loopholes that make it legal to use force and Qualified Immunity grants Law Enforcement Officers "get out of jail" free cards for acts that are seen as controversial and/or "the grey area". The model of policing was never structure with building community relationships in mind; the intent was to protect the property of property owners and to control those who were seen as potential "troublemakers". You can draw up your own conclusion on who might have been labelled as troublemakers and the demographic of property owners. With that in mind, the question then becomes, were police ever tasked with protecting and serving the whole community? Keep in mind who makes up our communities today.
Now that we've briefly explored how the system of policing was structured, let's talk about the "good apples and bad apples" concept that we often hear about when we discuss police brutality. If an immaculate house is built on a rotting foundation, will constant renovation ever suffice? Well, maybe but chances are the rot or the termites will eat through the foundation and begin to feed off of the actual house. At some point, you'd have to deal with the diseased foundation if you ever wanted to truly live in the house without worry. Now, relate that to policing; can a good cop ever exist long term in a toxic system? Possibly, but chances are, that cop would eventually get with the culture or leave because ethically, he/she wouldn't be able to become what the culture forces you to become. So now, to answer the question: Do I support the demand around defunding the APD by 50%? I support a divesting in policing and reinvesting in a Community Model that is structured to serve the whole community. I don't know if it is realistic to call for a 50% divestment because I don't know what the budget looks like in a line by line breakdown. However, I do feel that there are a lot of responsibilities that fall on police that would be better addressed by those who have been invested in that line of work. For example, a mental health crisis is not something that Law Enforcement Officers should be tasked with. The many layers associated with such a crisis are not always seen on the surface such as a person who has recently become unemployed, who can't afford their medication and as a result has gone unmedicated for 2 weeks and is now having a crisis. A call for police, often made by someone else who doesn't have that background knowledge, can be detrimental because the perception may have been

3. **Explain why you want to serve on City Council.**

I think my desire to serve on City Council is directly tied to my desire to serve the many Asheville Communities. What I have learned through my advocacy work and my work as the Community Liaison for the Racial Justice Coalition is that our communities are made up of so many different voices and perspectives and that all deserve to be heard and valued. A liaison is one who coordinates or facilitates a close working relationship between people and/or organizations. In my opinion, that should be in the forefront of the minds of all who serve on City Council; facilitating, maintaining and supporting a working relationship between City Government and ALL of the voices that make up our community. I think it is also important that we prioritize the most impacted in our community especially since i've heard our City Manager say on several occasions that equity is a value of Asheville City Government. If indeed equity is a value, it will always be reflected in all of the choices made on behalf of and in support of the most impacted in our community. If I am selected to serve on the City Council, I will serve as a verbal reminder that the voices of those who have disposable time and income are important, just as the voices of the single mother with two jobs and no time to sit in on the council meetings, is equally as important and if we are making decisions based on what the person with enough time to show up to every meeting wants without thought around what the single mother needs, we are not only being exclusive but we are being biased in our decision making and our community will suffer because of it.

4. **If selected, how do you plan to communicate and work with the other Council members? To help us understand, please give examples of your working collaboratively in the past.**

I can say with confidence that all of my work around advocacy and all the work that I have done and continue to with the Racial Justice Coalition has depended heavily on collaboration and there has only been success because I am not tasked with doing the work alone. Specifically related to the City Council, If I were to be selected, I would rely on counterparts in the beginning to help me understand all of the dynamics around making informed decisions in support of the whole community. Going forward, I would be committed to listening to understand each of their perspectives, gathering all the facts regardless of whether or not the facts support my personal perspective and working collaboratively in order to get to the intended outcome which I am assuming is to always to make our community better for those who live and play here first and foremost and to continue to make our city a desired location to visit while stimulating the economy during the visits. (Of course, I am not advocating for tourism while we are still in the midst of a pandemic but I do recognize that when the time comes, that will also be a part of our conversations as well)
I think the best example that I can give as it relates to working collaboratively is how my partner and I (Racial Justice Coalition) identified the need to work with and in support of the community in response to the pandemic and the disparities that were happening around housing insecurities. We realized very quickly that there is power in numbers and that if we wanted to be effective in advocating for those who have been most impacted by job loss, wage loss and were in threat of losing their housing, we not only needed to collaborate with them to confirm that they were indeed in need of this type of advocacy but that we also needed to team up with those who had the resources and connections to advocate on their behalf as well. After identifying everyone that needed to be at "the table", we "built a table" big enough for everyone to be there, we lifted the voices of those that would be most impacted by the decisions being made and we kept them centered throughout the entire process. Above all things, this process taught us that we are better together and that we can go so much further when we journey together. As a result, we now have an advocacy team of more than 1000 people who are committed to advocating in support the most impacted in our community.

5. **What do you consider the most pressing problem, need, or cause for the citizens of Asheville today? How would you approach its resolution or champion the cause?**

What a complex question this is; the most pressing problem, need, or cause for citizens of Asheville today? While so many problems, needs and causes come to mind, I think at the root of all that comes to my mind is this: the most pressing problem, need and cause for all citizens of Asheville today is the lack of ability that we have to relate to those in situations that are foreign to us thus leading to the lack of understanding around why things need to change, are changing and why we can no longer be complacent in our need to make those necessary changes. Consider were we are physically, mentally and emotionally, not just locally but across the Country. There is a loud "cry" to defund police departments, controversial monuments are coming down all over the country, we are talking about reparations AGAIN in some places and for the first time in other places, we are working on reforming our justice system and allies of all colors and walks of life are joining forces to demand a change in "business as usual". In the same breath, there are those who are attempting to "grip honey"; trying to hold on tight to what has been "the norm" for so long and the tighter they squeeze, the more it seems to slip through their fingers. How can both be true at the same time? I'll tell you how; because before we were forced to pause, before the world was forced to "stop and take a time-out", we were all just comfortable enough to not have to consider the fact that there are those who live just a few minutes in town or outside of town who are barely surviving day to day. Or maybe we had an idea and maybe even acknowledged the differences but we were just too busy with our own lives to advocate for change. Or maybe we subconsciously believed that there was some truth to the stereotypes that pointed to "them being too lazy to get ahead", "them not wanting it bad enough" "they didn't pull themselves up by their bootstraps" or "affirmative action fixed it". Whatever it was, we weren't close enough to the "fire" to want to do something about the heat until now.

I think it is a fine time to be transparent about our history as a country and as a City so that we are well aware of the facts that layout the blueprint of where we started and how we arrived at present day. It is hard to understand what you don't know and it is hard to know what has been hidden for so long; that's where we start, we start at the root.

Why is there such a deep need for affordable, livable housing in Asheville? Why is the Achievement/Opportunity gap so large in Asheville City Schools, why are black and brown people stopped by APD more often then white people? Why is the percentage of homeownership by black residents so low in Asheville? Why is public housing situated in food deserts? Why did it take a pandemic and another televised assassination of a black man for us to pause and listen to understand instead of listen to respond?

All of these are questions that we need to keep in the forefront of our minds and move forward intentionally towards the change that we need to implement that serves our community as a whole.

The only way to get to the other side of these disparities is to be honest, transparent, commit to working through the uncomfortable moments with the goal of being better together. The best approach I can envision is involving, including and working with the community at the beginning of the process, embedding equity in the entire process so that accountability is also present, analysis our current policies, ordinances, procedures and practices and figure out who they benefit, who they burden and how we plan to mitigate the unintended consequences, keeping community engaged throughout the duration of the process, giving their voices power to influence changes and