



## *Listening to Marvin*

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Greetings friends and neighbors. As you finish sorting your trick-or-treat candy from this year's festivities, remember that our municipal election is just a few days away. In case the dog ate your smartphone, voting day is next **TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 5<sup>th</sup>**.

In a political environment where our Congress is doing nothing and desperately seeking an identifiable crime, we need to remember that our government starts here, at home, in Marvin. As such, we need to be active participants in picking our representatives who will be responsible for policy around our Village.

Each election, for the last 15 years, I have developed a survey for local candidates based on feedback from you, the residents and voters, in Marvin. The was, and has always been, to be better informed about who is representing us and what their views, passions and priorities may be. This year was a little different in that we started the election season with three open positions—Mayor and two Council jobs—but only one candidate for each position. Each candidate was believed to be running unopposed. But wait, BREAKING NEWS-- “unopposed” has changed with 2019’s “October Surprise.” More on this later

So, I thought “wow, a year off! (At least *before* the Breaking News)” All was going well until a few weeks ago when my e-mail inbox began to fill with questions about “this year’s survey”. “Did I miss it?” “Would you resend it, it must have hit my spam folder” “Our HOA president has changed and the new one didn’t forward the Marvin Survey”. Etc. Etc. Etc.

Well, since I hadn’t prepared a 2019 written survey, I was in a fix. This election is important—as they all are. And, our residents deserve to know what their elected

officials are thinking. So, I scramble. This year there wasn't time for the traditional mailed responses, so I executed on "Plan B". I called the candidates and walked through the questions that would have been in the e-mail survey. As you'll see, some cared enough to respond. Others didn't. I think that speaks volumes to the commitment of connecting with and representing Marvin constituents.

Normally, I place the full responsibility, and/or blame, for typos on the candidates since they respond to the e-mail survey and I just "cut and paste". This year, the typos are all my own and I take full responsibility for all grammatical errors! I hope I don't embarrass Mrs. Stratton, my 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, too badly.

### **Background**

Despite the lack of municipal candidates, this is a very important election for our Village. Personally, I view it as a kind of referendum on the government residents expect. It will shape how decisions are made and those decisions could have a lifetime of impact for us, as residents.

The last couple years have been tumultuous in Marvin. The Mayor and Council have been embroiled in one controversy after another and have had to fend off accusations of everything from misuse of funds to illegal meetings to campaign finance violations to corruption and graft. To most, this unbridled chaos was a sad commentary on lack of leadership. To others, it was simply embarrassing. Certainly, it didn't go unnoticed beyond our zip code as actions by the Mayor and Majority brought the ire of State agencies.

But, here we are with another election and the reality that there will be some new players at the council table in coming months. So, who are these people? What do they stand for? What is their vision for Marvin? What do they think about the hot-button issues that you've raised?

As noted, some candidates didn't respond. That's unfortunate. Perhaps its even arrogant. You'll make that conclusion in the voting booth next Tuesday. Several sources have confirmed, independently, that Council member Vandenberg has coached some candidates to not respond to ANY questions—not to the annual survey, not to media questions. Period. Reportedly, Ms. Vandenberg views her upcoming role as the senior Councilmember as one responsible for controlling communication and narrative. Lets hope this isn't the case. Ms. Vandenberg should have gained experience that could be helpful in local government. Time will tell. We all hope for a new beginning of transparency in the Village Hall.

As always, I encourage you to forward this e-mail to all of your friends and neighbors so that they have more information to make their decisions.

## **Mayor**

This will be an interesting act to follow. You'll recall the Marvin's mayor has been at the heart of much of the chaos of the last couple years in our local government. Remember that incumbent mayor Polino, along with Councilmembers Vandenberg and Dispenzire, tried to force a change in procedure which would allow the mayor to vote on all issues all the time. The Village Charter allows for the mayor to vote **only** in the event of a council tie.

This attempted change led to Marvin's own version of a "Constitutional Crisis". It resulted in a grass roots movement to place a referendum on the ballot. The expectation was that the people—through the ballot box, not the mayor and two council people—would make the decision on whether the mayor would vote every issue every time, or not.

With little effort, more than two and a half times more petitions were gathered than what State Statutes require to put a public referendum on the ballot. In the end, Councilman Dispenzire chose to respect the will of the people and the matter was dropped. Mayor Polino and Councilmember Vandenberg were left alone in supporting this attempt.

The new mayor will have a real challenge in providing leadership where it has been lacking and work to restore public confidence in our local government. Here are notes from my discussion with Chris Smith, candidate for mayor.

## **Chris Smith—Mayoral Candidate**

Chris Smith holds the distinction of being a Marvin resident a couple of times. Either he's not very trainable, or he really likes Marvin! Clearly, he's a very bright guy and he's very committed to the community of Marvin where he has chosen to raise his family.

Chris, along with his wife and three children, live in Marvin Creek where his twin girls are about to move from "day care to sports". Having been there and done that I can fully appreciate moving from one kind of family chaos to another! I reminded him that some semblance of a social life begins to return when the youngest child hits 18 years of age!

Mr. Smith works in the banking industry. An Army veteran, his expertise lies with fraud prevention and data analytics. What was evident from my call is that Chris is about data. He has a good decision-making process that will be driven by data first, emotion second. This will be an important skill in managing the direction of the Village, it's Council and Staff.

In the few minutes he has after family and work, Smith is an avid antique car enthusiast. His 1950 Cadillac Coupe keeps him out of trouble by consuming the

spare time. He and his family are active members at Weddington Methodist Church.

He's been a student of the Marvin Village government process for several years and finally decided to engage and try to provide leadership to make a difference.

Unlike our recent experience with a Mayor and Councilmembers inseparably connected to realtors, developers and special interests, I found Smith refreshing as he is neither a realtor nor developer. Having a "neutral" perspective on these kind of issues facing our community will be a hugely positive thing. He describes himself as "faction-less". This is really important and reflects his natural proclivity to be "fact driven".

Smith has been working hard over the last couple years to get familiar with the Village Board system and the members of the Council.

#### Top Issue

I asked about his view of the current situation. He zeroed in on the issue of lack of transparency. He talked about the mistrust that this fosters and how transparency leads to better answers made with greater efficiency. As I asked for specific examples, he was quick to articulate on the matter of the Village taking over the maintenance of roads.

*(As background, a plan was developed to provide for road maintenance to move from the State's responsibility to the Village. The original plan was developed on a 12 year cycle. This was a fiscally responsible approach as the State funding would match up with Village requirements on a 12 year cycle. This has now been driven to an 8 year cycle. Frankly, the math no longer matches and this will have to be addressed. Otherwise, the money will run out far ahead of the constituent expectation.)*

Smith talked about how, when road priorities where changed, the decisions seemed to be made in the dark of night and rolled out to residents. It's possible that there was good rationale about re-working the priorities, but that rationale was never discussed or exposed to the citizens. As such, it's another example where the best of intentions, coupled with a lack of transparency, leads to a disastrous outcome. A few people were pleased. Most were not. Many were just disgusted with the Council's latest shenanigans.

Chris Smith is about data and efficiency. He spoke to an expectation that Council people should be prepared for Council meetings. He was unequivocally disappointed by Councilmembers who failed to prepare and still tried to opine on agenda matters. This often leads to having to educate the unread Councilmember so that the agenda item could be addressed. Obviously, this wastes a lot of people's time (including that of Village staff) because someone fails to do their job. I walked away from this topic believing that Smith will set the

expectation high and not be afraid to call a spade a spade when Councilmembers are unprepared. There may be some interesting fireworks here as the existing council (and those newly elected) learn to meet the expectation that they signed on for in their roles.

We discussed the carnival atmosphere created by the Mayor and Majority Council members during the “Mayoral Vote” debate. These elected officials skipped meetings, even after committing to them, causing a start-stop exercise with staff and other Council members. Smith, again, was unapologetic in pointing out that “consciously subverting calendars is dereliction of duty”. Wow, that’s pretty clear.

I asked Smith about what he saw as the top three issues facing our community. He gave me four. (Note: deduct points for not sticking to the question! Three, not Four! Ha)

1. Village Center and Town Hall—Smith described this as a great example of the lack of transparency and inappropriate connection to special interests. He thinks that the community, not a few developers and realtors, either elected or appointed, working from both sides of the question. “This needs to be an open process, *then* talk to developers, not the other way around.” “We should consider wiping the slate clean and then restarting with a clear process and community input.”
2. Remaining Development Strategy—“I’m highly sensitive to the incestuous nature of political/developer relationships. I treat my lack of being a realtor as a point of distinction. I’m not business as usual. I’m not against development or developers making a profit. But, I think it’s, ethically, a problem when developers are decision makers for the Village.”
3. Marvin’s Reputation with other nearby Stakeholders—“Marvin has earned a reputation for being difficult to work with. I think a lot of this is driven by a lack of transparency. The proposed development at Bonds Grove Church Road and Providence Road is a great example. The property owners should have been more in tune with Marvin goals and Marvin should have been more transparent with its expectations. We need better relationships with Weddington, Union County, DOT, Sheriff Department, etc. Over time, being transparent will deliver better relationships. I think new leadership will help.”
4. Traffic and Safety—“There are two aspects here. On traffic, we need to work a better job of managing expectations. There is more development *outside* Marvin than *inside*. Marvin isn’t the source of our traffic problems. But, we can’t unilaterally do anything about it. Where we have choices and options, we need to be open and honest about the cost. We have a low tax rate. If people like that, we need to be transparent with the cost. Security is the second aspect: Discussions of adding another deputy will cost about \$120k, approximately 10% of the total budget. Adding another deputy means 10% less of everything else. We’re low crime but we’re not crime free. We want to keep this

way. People don't spend time thinking about crime ahead of schools and other things. If community wants that another deputy, then we need to honestly face up to the costs."

Picking up on the issue of taxes, I asked about his view. Raise them? Lower them? Or, just right?

"Marvin has, historically been, and will continue to be, a low tax community. People are generally averse to higher taxes. Non-Marvin services (schools, fire protection, etc.) are more important to them than additions to the budget whether its more parks or anything else."

Are you fine with it? "I'd like to see more security. I like the visibility of our Sheriff car driving down my street. If the community likes that too, and wants more of it, it'll be 1-cent out of the five we currently tax or more taxes. The park could be better. But, if our residents want more and want to pay for it, we should listen."

### **Smith Summary—**

My take is Smith is a clear-thinking business executive. I think he's coming into the job with a clear understanding of how much work it will take to get the Village back to a more functional process. Most encouraging was that his perspective has ZERO special interest fuel that I could identify. He doesn't arrive with some of the baggage of recent officials and, if he stays true to his word, he's going to be driven by what the community wants and the data that supports it. As noted, refreshing.

### **Jamie Lein—Council Candidate**

Mr Lein did NOT respond to requests for feedback and articulation of his vision for the Village.

Lein is reported to be unlike some of the community groups who have a single issue agenda and "group think". He seems to be pretty well known in his Firethorn community but a virtual unknown outside of his neighborhood.

Several people have indicated that Jamie has told him that his "single reason for running is to keep Mary Skhut out of office." When I first heard this, I dug deeper and it was confirmed several times. I find this both frightening and odd as there are no reports of him attending council meetings or being engaged in other areas of Village service. No planning board experience. No known feedback to council or boards on any issue. So, one has to wonder, "if he is elected, he will have accomplished his goal of "blocking" Ms. Skhut. But, what about governing and doing the job?" After all, being a Council member is a two-year job.

Some who know him are "very surprised" at Jamie's interest in a seat. Some think this is a result of his reported close relationship with Joe Polino, Kim Vandenberg and commercial developers with an eye on Marvin.

So, any motivation on the part of Mr Lein to serve in the public interest can't be identified. I suppose you don't have to be too motivated to solve problems and serve the public in the event that you believe you're running unopposed. This is especially the case if your motivation has nothing whatsoever to do with policy. He has no known favorite policy issues—at least none that his associates could identify. Certainly, none that I could uncover. He just doesn't seem to care about much of anything other than preventing Mary Skhut from getting elected. Clearly, Lein and Skhut could not be much more polar opposite than they are in terms of public service and vision for the community.

Residents of the Courtyards of Marvin have reported that both Lein and Robert Marcollese met with a group from Courtyards of Marvin and promised them that no development (Bonds Grove Church and Providence) would occur behind their houses. This raises danger signs as 1. They have no power to make that decision-- they're not even elected officials. 2. They can't unilaterally approve/disapprove any development in the Village. There are planning, permit and ordinance steps that need to be completed. It is irresponsible to make a promise about a policy position with zero data. None. Zippo. Nada. This looks like blatant pandering for votes and being more puppets for the current realtor/developer driven factions on the council. We can only hope that both candidates have a more independent view if elected. And, a willingness to learn about the process.

It is reported, and documented, that a commercial developer and planning board member seems to be deeply involved in this proposed development and the development of a proposed Marvin Town Center. If true, this is exactly the kind of process corruption that Mayoral candidate Smith spoke of. Very soon he'll "own" it. Rooting out corruption needs to be the first step in re-establishing government accountability.

### **Robert Marcollese—Council Candidate**

I spoke with Mr. Marcollese twice. He was extremely hesitant to respond to any questions about his views, vision, and policy positions. In order to get some feedback, I provided him an opportunity to respond to questions via e-mail. He assured me he would have time to respond in writing. He had about three hours to provide that feedback to a few basic questions. He failed to follow through on his commitment to respond. Its not clear whether Mr. Marcollese found the questions too pointed, or, perhaps he viewed them as not worthy of his effort since he believed he was running unopposed. In any event, firsthand feedback wasn't available from the candidate himself.

Mr. Marcollese is a resident of Heritage Oaks (nextdoor to Firethorn). He has no experience in serving on any Village Boards that I can identify.

Most recently he has distinguished himself by engaging as a one-issue advocate—road paving. He has been active and incensed at the process of not

paving his roads first, or at least being high on the list. He did attend a Council meeting to express his displeasure with not being first on the list. His behavior was demonstrative of a complete lack of understanding of the road paving process.

As best can be determined, he attend only one council meeting to scream at the council. His anger seemed to be singularly focused on Robert Epps and Mary Shkut. He was livid about their desire to follow the process agreed to and with that the priority of paving the oldest roads first. It was clear he cared little about policy, procedure or fiscal reality surrounding this subject.

This road paving was a \$375k decision. Keep in perspective that this is more than 25% of the Village's total annual revenue. Eliminating one development and replacing it with Heritage Oaks and Firethorn resurfacing was the issue. Epps and Shkut were trying to determine how the change of priority occurred. How did this happen? What procedure was used? What criteria was used to make the change?

To add bizarre to the weird in this meeting, Mr. John Jones poured ground asphalt on the floor of the village hall during Mr. Marcolese's tirade against the Council. Apparently, the intention was to make a point his roads were in bad shape and needed to go first.

The questions raised by Epps and Shkut were focused on how/why was the prioity change made? Can we afford it? What is the new priority? How do we explain the change to constituents? What, exactly, is the procedure to determine priority?

It is interesting to note that councilman Dispenziere threatened to call the Sheriff department to have Marcolese and Jones removed from the meeting.

This evidence of Marcolese being quite myopic to broad questions around an issue—even if its his only issue. Clearly, he is not inclined to be data driven. Attempts were made by several on the Council to help to educate Marcolese about the process but were met with a deaf ear towards the information.

### **October Surprise!—Mary Shkut**

It seems every election has one! This year's surprise in Marvin is the late entry of a write-in candidate for Council. Mary Shkut has more Marvin government experience than anyone serving the Village today. Her history began at the Board staff level and was eventually named to the Council seat vacated by Ron Salimao when Ron moved out of the Village.

Since her appointment, Ms. Shkut has been viewed as a hindrance to the "Majority" (Polino, Vandenberg and Dispenziere) agenda. While they have continually demonstrated a view to make-it-up-as-we-go-along, Ms. Shkut's deep

understanding of historical processes, ordinances and procedures derailed many of the “ready-fire-aim” actions of the Majority.

Simply put, Ms. Shkut’s obsession with detail and transparency served the community well over the last couple years.

This year, Ms. Shkut headed for “retirement” from public service. All that seemed to change late this week when a grassroots push for her to reengage and run for Council as a write-in candidate emerged.

I spoke with Ms. Shkut and asked her for some feedback on the process, her decision and what she saw as opportunity for the Council and our community.

As much as Chris Smith is data driven, Mary Shkut is process driven. She takes the data available—and digs to make sure she has all that there is—then matches this up with how the particular issue has been dealt with in the past and how it is guided by local ordinance and State and Federal Law. You can see how this was a major roadblock to those not interested in details, or for that matter, legality of some decisions.

I asked why she wanted to do this. She chuckled and said that, initially, “it was difficult to know what to do. I had mentally prepared to move on from the Council role and return to “civilian” life. Frankly, I’m flattered that so many people think I’ve made a difference. That is very exhilarating to me and I want to continue to have an impact. I live in Marvin with my family. I want it to thrive.”

“Interest seems to be building and I am energized. In a community like ours, there is a risk that a single neighborhood can monopolize the agenda for the whole Village. I think we’re more than that. We’re a collection of neighborhoods that make up a single community. My experience is that its very easy for a single neighborhood to consciously, or unconsciously, become a single-issue voice. Marvin has great opportunity for the future but not if we become beholden to a single issue, a single neighborhood or even a single representative.”

“I think the Council has struggled to dig out of disfunction due to a lack of leadership. Leadership starts at the top and I think Chris Smith brings an exciting new perspective—one sorely needed. Sometimes I think that single issue advocates lose sight that our Village Government isn’t some kind of game. Its more than a single issue “win”. While your issue is important, it needs to be viewed in light of everyone’s important issue.”

I asked what she saw as key “hot button” issues.

“First, transparency. Our Council has operated under a cloud. Every time an issue came up, it seems as if there was some “backdoor deal” that came along with it—either real or perceived. Marvin voters are smart. They quickly came to lose trust in the Mayor and Council actions. That is unfortunate and it needs to

change. Many of the “shady deals” didn’t need to be shady. If there was transparency, it would foster trust.”

“Next, ethics. I felt like many times I was fighting a lone battle to use open, best practices, in our decision making. From ordinance variance requests to purchasing processes, it seems the “deals” were already done before we, as an entire Council, could begin to weigh in on them. To this end, I introduced the idea of a “Statement of Economic Disclosure” form. As you can imagine, there was more than a little push back on this. Probably, for obvious reasons. However, in the end, my pressure (and that of the community desperate for full disclosure) prevailed. This is now required of ALL council members and the Mayor and our Village staff each year. Along with economic disclosures, it requires disclosure about their association and affiliations. Now, everyone will know a little more about each of their official’s motivations.”

“It will be interesting to see if the new Council, that I hope to be a part of, will maintain the disclosure process and promote it with our constituents. Our community deserves a better clarity on us, their elected officials”.

When asked about another big issue, Ms. Shkut pointed to procurement. “Procurement is a big issue. The money is NOT our own. It belongs to our constituents. I found that the Mayor and some on the Council seem to have forgotten who they work for and who’s money they’re spending. This was evident in several “buy” actions driven by the Mayor and a Planning Board member. In one such instance, the Mayor presented the Council with a purchase contract for a Master Plan for the proposed Village Center. I was like...”what? Where did this come from? Who approved this deal? We aren’t anywhere near ready to pay for a plan.” The Council needs to be accountable. Unfortunately, the Mayor and Majority seemed to forget this concept far too often.

*(Note: e-mails have surfaced that show the Mayor, Planning Board Member Lavelle and others discussing this contract and encouraging the Mayor to “go line up some public funding to make this happen.” Keep in mind that any action needs to be at the sole direction of the Council and good financial discipline would require any contract to be an open bid process.)*

“I’m looking forward to being a key figure in opening the dark closets of Council and making transparency with our constituent’s money a first tier issue.”

I asked Ms. Shkut how she planned to proceed considering her late start. She said that she was very encouraged by the momentum that seems to be building behind her and that she was actively getting the word of her desire to be “written-in” to as many people as possible.

Later, I received an example of what a write-in ballot would look like on Tuesday. Keep in mind that you can vote for TWO Council positions. This can be any

combination of Ms. Shkut, Mr. Marcollese and Mr. Lein, or any other write-in you desire.

MARVIN ELECTION DAY

Tuesday, Nov. 5, 2019

6:30 a.m. - 7:30 p.m.

SAMPLE BALLOT

VILLAGE OF MARVIN

Mayor

(You may vote for ONE)

Christopher Smith



Write-In

Council

(You may vote for TWO)

Jamie H. Lein

Bob Marcolese

MARY SHKUT

Write-In



Write-In

- 1. Write-in "Mary Shkut"
- 2. Then, fill-in the bubble!



Disclaimer: This sample ballot is not an official ballot. Paid for by an independent citizen expenditure of a sum total below the one hundred dollar limit.

FIND POLLING LOCATION

- ◆ Kensington Elementary School
- ◆ Marvin AME Zion Church
- ◆ Marvin Elementary School
- ◆ Sandy Ridge Elementary School

### Shkut Summary—

Mary Shkut's late entry to the Council race is a good thing for Marvin. Competition always leads to higher performance. In considering the entire field of candidates in this election, Ms. Shkut is unique. Unlike any of the others running for election, she has actual experience with our local Village government. And, perhaps even more importantly, her experience has been gained across several roles at several organizational levels—from Staff to Boards to Council.

Keep in mind that all of these positions are part-time jobs. Every candidate is presumed to have a life *outside* the Village Hall. To this end, having a candidate with both experience and a pension for detail should be a tremendous advantage to our community. When coupled to a new Mayor with true leadership skills and a lack of special-interest adhesion, this could be a powerful combination. Our Village swamp need draining. It'll take passion, experience and a tireless vision to make it happen. I'm not so naïve to think that transparency will happen over night. But, I do think the light can be come brighter each day with the right people operating the switches.

Ms. Shkut has maintained a website since her appointment to the Council. It is: "mary4marvin.com". You can learn a bit more about her and her experience on that website.

## **Conclusion**

While some may have viewed the “unopposed” nature of this election to be unworthy of their efforts in voting, nothing could be further from the truth. Now, “unopposed” has been removed and each candidate—either Mayor or Council--needs to know that there is a community that is engaged and cares about what they do and how they perform.

As always, I encourage you to get to the polls on Tuesday and let your voice be heard. That voice may come as a write-in vote, or it may not. In any event, don't let your engagement start and end on Tuesday. Your family, your neighbors and your community are counting on you to be a part of keeping Marvin the best place to live in all of North Carolina.

I'd be remiss to not take a moment to, again, thank each of you who take time to read this election survey and pass it on to your friends and neighbors. To those of you who pestered.....errr, I mean “encouraged”....me to reach out to candidates for this election, a special thank you is in order. Your calls and e-mails reminded me that being a Citizen is an ACTIVE concept.

Be sure to pass this on to everyone you know. Thanks, again.



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