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Traffic, growth at the center of voters' concerns

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MORRISVILLE - Fast-growing Morrisville enjoys perhaps the Triangle's most enviable location: smack in the middle.

But it also suffers a supersize version of one of the region's biggest headaches: traffic.

The town's key intersection, N.C. 54 and Morrisville-Carpenter Road, is jammed each day during the morning and afternoon rush hours.

The town of 15,000 in the center of the Triangle is spending almost \$5 million to widen and improve the intersection.

On Nov. 6, voters here will choose four of seven town board members to decide the town's future growth, taxes and services -- how much, in other words, to widen and improve the town.

As elsewhere in the Triangle, growth has been good for Morrisville, but not entirely so.

Most of the seven candidates -- six on the ballot and one seeking write-in votes -- echo the call for better growth management that rang out loudly in Raleigh's and Cary's elections this month.

Here's a look at the races:

District 2

"Growth is going to happen," said Mark Stohlman, an accountant running unopposed for the open District 2 seat. "It's good for the community, but you have to do it responsibly."

Stohlman followed a common route into local politics: Serving as president of his neighborhood homeowners association brought him into contact with town policies and officials, some of whom encouraged him to run. After Stohlman filed, initial candidate Kris Gardner withdrew.

"I'm thrilled to have this opportunity," he said. "My competition is voter apathy."

At-large

Competing for one of two at-large seats, incumbent Pete Martin, Morrisville's mayor pro tempore, faces Michael Roberts, another neighborhood leader who thinks the town can do better than it has. He was involved in a successful drive to get public school bus stops off a busy and dangerous road.

Roberts, a manager at Fidelity Investments, said he'd be more actively involved in meeting Morrisville's challenges.

"Wake County's towns have to work with the school board to help them understand the issues in the towns," Roberts said. "I don't think we've done that well."

"I'm by no means a stop-growth person. But we need to manage growth."

Martin, a financial services representative at Duke Medical Center, said he already does those things for the town. He said he'll push for a vibrant downtown and better roads.

"We need a downtown -- it's the beating heart," he said. "Morrisville is no longer a place along the highway. It is a destination."

District 1

Incumbent Linda Lyons goes against Heather Leigh Hudson, another neighborhood leader.

Lyons, a Verizon customer service technician, said Morrisville is in danger of losing its charm.

"I think we're growing too fast," Lyons said. "We don't have the roads and other infrastructure to keep up. People moved here for the small-town feel, and we're losing it."

Lyons said Morrisville needs better roads, but she's not sure how to pay for them. "I do not support toll roads or higher taxes."

Hudson, a part-time saleswoman and member of the town's Solid Waste Recycling Committee, said neighborhood activists recruited her to run.

"Traffic is No. 1 in the minds of Morrisville residents," she said. "Growth and new development are very important. But we should look at our infrastructure and see how we can improve it, and we need to make sure that we don't approve projects that make it worse."

Hudson said she'd push for more synchronized traffic lights, more carpooling and some new and widened roads, including more right-turn lanes, while protecting the town's financial health.

District 3

Liz Johnson, the incumbent, has no official competition but faces the write-in campaign of retiree Rich Elliott.

"I'm running to continue the work I've been doing the past eight years," Johnson said. "We've had some wonderful successes, although I'm keenly aware that more work needs to be done."

Johnson, a homemaker, community activist and former IBM worker, said she listens carefully to residents and developers alike, and then works toward compromise. If residents' concerns aren't addressed, she said, she'll vote against development.

"I've always taken a balanced approach to growth," she said. "To me, that means that the growth that occurs is desirable to the residents of Morrisville and enhances their quality of life."

Elliott, a retired New York Port Authority manager and frequent commenter on town affairs, said he wants to promote more suburban development and help bring more public schools to town.

"The town has to change directions to slow growth, contain traffic and promote a middle school and high school," he said. "We need to do more to make Morrisville a typical suburban town with a small-town feel."

And why didn't he file to run?

"I hemmed and hawed," he said, "and I missed the deadline."

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