



by Diane Maehl Photography

Condon's Balancing Act

by Blythe Thimsen

Q&A

AS MAYOR DAVID CONDON arrives at his fifth floor office in City Hall, he needs just a few minutes to regroup before sitting down to talk. His schedule for the day is packed, with the morning's interview followed by a lunch appointment; emails, phone calls and meetings fill the afternoon, and an evening television appearance with City Council President Ben Stuckart will keep him at the office late. It was the early morning breakfast meeting he just wrapped up, though, that might be the most important appointment of the day. "Thanks for waiting," he says, "my son wanted us to eat breakfast together."

Learning to balance not just the city budget, but also life as a politician and a father to two young children, Condon, Spokane's 44th mayor (and the youngest at age 38) is bringing a fresh perspective to City Hall. "People are excited to have a family in the office," he says of the presence of his wife and two young children who are familiar faces around the office. "It shows longevity." His family knows home life and work life are both important to him. "It's a way of life, it's not a job," he says of serving as mayor of Spokane.

After a quick review of the awaiting emails and work on his desk, Condon is ready to sit down to discuss the balance he is seeking for himself and for our city. He also tells us why he won't take the city retirement, why he wants to re-engineer the way government works and create a retirement system "that is more individual, more portable and is ultimately financially sustainable for the city", where you can find him wearing a kilt, and why he wants people excited about living in Spokane.

What made you decide, "I want to run for mayor"?

Last spring I made up my mind. In all reality, Mary [Verner] was very popular at the time, so everybody was telling me, "Don't do it, why are you doing it?" and I just, in my gut, thought this is what I wanted to do. I'd been working in the federal government and, I won't lie, it was getting a little frustrating. It seemed like we were dealing with the same issues year after year and we weren't making any progress. I'm still altruistic enough, or naive enough, however you want to say it, that I needed to look at local politics for where you can make that change. I'm born and bred Spokane. My whole family lives here. I have 30-some-odd nieces and nephews and they nearly all live here. I'm the youngest of nine kids and they all own small businesses here and are very involved in the community. My parents raised us that way; my mom and dad were very involved in the community, so it was somewhat a natural fit for me.

Why run for mayor, rather than starting with City Council?

I was really attracted to where you make the most change, and that really is in the executive branch of government, where you can have daily impact on people's lives. I thought, if I'm going to do this—and to be quite candid, the reality is a lot of times you only have one chance at this—and I don't see myself being in public office forever, do it now. I also think the reason why we have a strong mayor is to have somebody come from the outside, and ask the question "Why?" So it's my job to ask why and also to direct in the direction I see fit and, presumably, in the direction the public sees fit.

In the August primary you received 33.53% of the vote compared to the 59.35% that former Mayor Verner received, yet in the November election you received 52.4% of the votes. Were you surprised by the primary, and to what do you owe the dramatic upswing in votes?

It was a tough blow. I thought I was going to do better in the primaries, although I was realistic. I had no name ID, she had basically universal name ID. I went right back and started making phone calls to everybody that had donated to me. I didn't get a single person that said, "David, fold up your tent and go home." My wife and I just kept on knocking on doors. The last part of August going into September, we were knocking on doors and I could really feel the tide turn. Going into September and October, I felt much more confident of where we were going. I was cautiously optimistic. I knew we would be very, very close, one way or another.



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Q&A

Only 56.9% of people who received ballots returned them. What can we do to get people more interested in city government?

I did a lot of knocking on doors. A lot of people think the council runs our city, because they see them on TV every Monday night. It used to be you'd go door to door, now you have Facebook and everything else, TV, newspaper. People have it coming from so many different directions now that going to their door actually works. It's back to retail politics; you have to go to them. We have a lot of town halls where they can come to you, but a politician in this day and age, because we have parents that are both working, kids that are very busy, you really need to go to them, and quite fundamentally, you have to go to their doorstep.

The last 10 Spokane mayors have been one-term mayors. Is that enough time to make changes?

It definitely puts everything on hyper speed. We've made lot of significant changes already in the first 30 days. In a strong mayor form of government you can have different types of leadership. I've taken a lot of the Meyers-Briggs tests, and I'm a Pacesetter and a Coach. As a Pacesetter, you really hold people accountable, and you're willing to put in the work, so you expect them to do the same thing. You're willing to coach them along, but if they can't make it, they get cut from the team and we move on, because we need to have the best folks down here. Do I plan on running again? Of course. But I also have a family, and I'll make that determination when I get there.

Forbes magazine recently claimed that Spokane is tied for last place, nationally, in terms of job prospects. What specific action needs to be taken to paint a new picture of Spokane and ensure economic vitality?

I knocked on over 20,000 doors with my wife, and my campaign team on a lot more than that. The economy and the police department were the top two issues. I take a position with the economy that if we want a long-term growth model, we need to work as a city, predominantly separate from City Hall. When people talk about City Hall and business, they want City Hall to work at the speed of business and not slow anything down. One of the big issues is permits, and so we have an overhaul, which has been in the works, of our permits, reducing it down to an average wait of 30 days for commercial permits, which have been about 52 days.

Another thing we are looking at as we try to recruit businesses here is implementing what we call a "Certified Site Program" where we'll actually have sites throughout the city that we've done all the leg work on so we can commit to an expedited permit process. There are some key pieces of land in the city that we should have ready to go, so if someone comes to town and they need a certain amount of square feet to build a building, we're ready. So we are working very closely with the county, with other partners, whether that is Greater Spokane Incorporated and others, to set those sites up.

The other thing that I noticed when I was doing research to campaign was that the mayor appoints to numerous—well over 25 or 30—boards and commissions, and there wasn't a single one for business. So during the transition period, I invited in the executive directors and current-year presidents of the trade associations in Spokane. It was amazing. I really appreciated meeting so we can be

proactive on things that business should do. I think it's key that we do that so we can be proactive rather than reactive. We will be doing that on a quarterly basis; having a mayor's business advisory council.

Campaigns seem to always be nasty nowadays. How do you deal with that?

I did focus on some key areas I thought showed a lack of leadership. The strong mayor form of government means you need to get your ideas out there. The council and I have a great working relationship, but the reality is I run the city; they create the policy for the city. I think we need a mayor who's willing to have a plan out there and is very forceful with that plan, so the public knows what the mayor's plan is. Like I said, going back to the campaign, I really focused on some key issue areas that I thought showed a lack of leadership, or we didn't know where the mayor was going with it—whether that was water rates, the Otto Zehm case, or the police department and what we were doing with property crimes. People were very concerned and they just didn't know what we were doing down at City Hall. There may have been things that were being done, but no one seemed to know what they were. So does it affect me personally? Sure, there were negative ads about me, but I've been around it long enough.

Despite the job of mayor being a non-partisan position, there are many who say you are a Republican mayor. How do you answer that?

I'm a Republican; this office is non-partisan. And I committed publicly that I would run the office non-partisan. As I'm selecting people for my cabinet, I've never asked them what party they're in. When I built the transition team, I called nearly every single one of them personally, and I didn't ask what party they were. They were people who had a demonstrated interest in and love for our city, and that is why they were on the transition team. Some of them have provided ideas to me that if you'd look on policy level, we probably don't agree on policy, but I'm not someone who says we shouldn't have as many ideas as possible here in Spokane. [City Council President] Ben Stuckart and I come from philosophically and politically different backgrounds, but we're working very closely together and enjoy a very good personal relationship, and I think the City of Spokane is going to be served well for that. I would hope people would hold me to this very candidly, that I am operating the office in a non-partisan fashion. I don't think they could point to any partisan decisions I've made thus far, or appointments.

Many of the cries at being a Republican versus non-partisan mayor stem from the \$60,000-plus in campaign contributions you received from the GOP.

The parties, typically, if they are going to give you money, ask you to sign their platform. I did not do that, and I did not apply to do that. So when they give me money, and if I didn't sign a pledge to their platform, they're signing up for *my* platform. I'm sure there will be decisions I make that will send them through the roof, but the reality is I didn't sign a pledge saying I'd uphold the party platform.

You objected when the outgoing mayor approved three-year contract extensions for Local 270 of the American Federation

Mayor David Condon with his wife, Kristin, and their two children, Hattie, 1 ½, and Creighton, 3.



photography by Shelli Sonderer

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of State, County and Municipal Employees and for the city's prosecutor's union a full year before their existing labor contracts were set to expire. What were your objections, and do you think a politician has an obligation to serve on their platform through the last day of their term, or do they owe the incoming official a courteous transition?

I totally concur that someone should work for what they are getting paid for. The difference in that particular case was that the contract wasn't even open. It wouldn't open until this coming year. That's what caught me off guard. The other issue was it didn't follow the negotiation principals that both the mayor and city council members had agreed to and memorialized in a resolution, meaning that there were a couple key issues. One was the negotiations would only be with a negotiation team, and that no one would end-run the negotiation team. The other issue, is, quite frankly, we need to re-engineer the way government works, and that contract is with over half of our employees here, and we need to talk about what does government look like going in to the future. And now, ironically enough, that contract is identical to my term in office. So to give me the latitude and a council the ability to sit down with the bargaining units, I completely respect their right to do that, but I think we could have had an honest discussion about what does a government employee look like going into the future.

What about our city government needs to be re-engineered?

I've worked in government a long time, and we have one-size fits all. In this city, it's even more restrictive than the federal government. I was sitting right here, with my benefits advisor for the city, with my wife, and we are coming with an HSA (a health savings account), but we don't have that opportunity here. We also don't have a 401(k) at the city; we have a retirement you get at five years, and it's an all-or-nothing system. I would rather have a 401(k), because I'd like to come, save for my future and take my money with me when I go. We have something similar to that, but by no means is it what we would think about in the commercial world. That's where I would want to look at how we provide services to the citizens. It's more difficult to have that discussion now, and I really think a younger work force would appreciate it. A lot of people say, "We don't want a revolving door in City Hall" meaning a lot of people come, leave, come back. Quite frankly, I take the opposite opinion. I think the city would really benefit to have somebody come here, maybe right out of college, work for three or four years, leave, come back maybe mid-career, go back out into the commercial world and come back. But right now, when you're in a retirement system like this is, it just pays to sit around and wait 20 years. Serve your time. The system kind of perpetrates a longevity issue and it's just a different work force.

What is your biggest frustration as a citizen of Spokane?

Probably my biggest frustration is that I'm sick of people feeling like they always want to be somewhere else. That is why the theme of my campaign was "This is Our Town" and that's why I have the "Our Town Gala." I think people need to be proud of where we are. Many of us don't want to live in Seattle, Portland or otherwise, and I'm sick of hearing about Expo '74. There seems to be an attitude of "we're

never going to get there." I want to change that attitude. Within City Hall, we need to change that attitude, but also across our city. Hopefully we can make it better economically so that our own kids can stay here, or we can continue to stay here. I'm going to have to find a job here in either four or eight years, so I'd sure like the opportunities to be out there and not have to look for somewhere else to go. That's my personal objective: to get rid of that stigma that we have to go someplace else. It will take some energizing folks to make those changes, but let's take a little ownership. This is our town and let's make some changes.

During campaigns, candidates make clear what their opponent is doing wrong or what they would do differently. Flipping the coin, what are some actions of your predecessor that you support?

I just empanelled the Use of Force Commission, and that is something that Mayor Verner started. What I like about that is that it is our citizens and our community making a determination of what they feel comfortable with the police officers doing, and an execution of the law. I support the Department of Justice's review, but more important, I support our own community deciding what we feel comfortable with, and so I was very supportive of that and empanelled them [on January 30, 2012] and the council confirmed their mission.

I do believe Mary was very passionate about this city, and I hope to continue that passion and talk about that passion a lot, so people know that their mayor is very supportive of what is going on in the city and where we are going.

Do you think it is possible for the city to have a balanced budget and do you see that happening?

I do; we will, there's no way around it. I plan on releasing a budget much earlier in the year than we have in the past, so that the citizens, vis-à-vis the council, have the opportunity to go through that budget. We need to, as a city, decide what we are going to do and what we aren't going to do so that we don't put that onus on the public. The average Spokane income is \$42,000 and we need to realize the magnitude of what some of these bills are that we are putting on some folks. The less disposable income they have, the less vibrant economy we have. We're going through, department by department, really deciding what the city's going to do and what we aren't going to do. There is no department that is immune to whether they should be part of the city government or not.

Some have wondered if your serving as mayor is a stepping-stone to your next campaign, perhaps for a higher office.

Well, if that were the case, it would have been pretty dumb to run for mayor because our mayors haven't had the best luck of being re-elected. I hear that a lot: "Obviously you ran for mayor so that you can run for another office." Well, if I was doing that, it probably would have been smarter for me not to run for mayor and just to run for whatever office that is, especially coming from a congressional office. Personally, it would be very difficult for me to make that sacrifice. Those that serve in federal office from Washington State, that's a huge sacrifice [commuting so much] and, at least at this point in my life, with my children, I'd like to raise them in Spokane.



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Former Mayor Mary Verner only took \$100,000 of the \$170,000 mayoral salary (although she has since requested the \$70,000 per year back pay). Will you take the full salary?

The mayor's salary for 2012 is in the budget. By no means am I going to go back to the council and ask them to change it you'd have to have an emergency budget ordinance. The current salary was budgeted, so that is what the public knows is our budget and we should stay within our budget. Going forward, fundamentally, I did talk a lot about salaries at City Hall. I think the public needs to know what they are getting for their money. I made comments about how many people make over \$100,000 at City Hall – I said over 100 and was corrected, it is 119. I don't mean to be disparaging over what people make; my issue is the citizens should demand the most out of City Hall. We have a lot of well-paid people, and they presumably deserve it; they're well educated – you've got engineers and planners. On the flip side, we should have a premier city, and I am going to demand that. I have already denied the retirement at the City Hall. I don't think it's a modern system; it's not a system that develops a 21st Century workforce. It benefits you the longer you stay here, it's not portable, it does not give the employee any choice like you find in the private sector. Very shortly, we'll decide what I do with my personal income, but the citizens should feel confident they are getting the mayor they're paying for. I'll be determining that, especially when I go into the next budget, but the public will be well aware of what they are paying the mayor.

Many citizens feel it's "Us vs. Them." How do you bridge gap between citizens and City Hall?

They do feel that, and I think we need to realize that here at City Hall. What I hope to do the most is open up City Hall, both electronically and physically, and let people know they are getting the best services they can possibly get. That's one key, to make sure we communicate with the city. I think people will be pleasantly surprised in the very near future as I talk about some of the major shifts in the architecture of the organization of the city; how neighborhoods will have a bigger voice down here, in the sense that they'll be able to communicate their concerns easier. A lot of people feel distanced from their police force. On Monday, February 6, 2012, I released our Police Action Plan. Police officers are now going to neighborhood council meetings so people can now voice their concerns to their police officers.

What emotional tone do you want to set for the community?

I want people to say "Damn right I live in Spokane, and I love this place!" This is our town and we need to be proud of our town and take care of our own issues and not look for someone else to take care of them on the problem solving side. I see myself as the Chief Marketing Officer and we need to market our city and our town – initially to ourselves. I don't think people initially appreciate what we have here. We can whitewater raft, kayak, ski within 45 minutes, can go to national traveling Broadway shows, and it is all right here.

How do you balance family and work?

This is a 24/7 job. My family is going to be there in four years, and I want to make sure I am there with them. Already, I've set a

moratorium: I'll do things in the evening, but cap them at three a week. And if I don't get re-elected because I wasn't doing things five to seven nights a week, I guess I won't get re-elected. It's very hard because I want to be at things, but my kids are only going to be this age once, so I'm judicious in what I do.

As you work to strike a balance between work and family, what are some of your favorite things to do when not "on the clock?"

Now that I'm a dad, I spend a lot of time with my kids. I am teaching my son how to snow ski. I grew up going to Hayden Lake; my grandfather bought property out there in the 1930s, so my wife and I go there a lot in the summer. My son and daughter have roughly 30 cousins out there, so it's a great place to see the family. We live in an old house on the lower South Hill, so we spend a lot of time taking care of our house; we love our neighborhood. We also spend a lot of time with our families. My wife comes from a very close-knit family and she has wonderful parents who spend a lot of time with our kids, which also helps with this job.

In which local restaurants would we most likely bump into you?

I've become a big sushi fan, so I am very excited about all the sushi restaurants we have now. Also, we like going to the neighborhood restaurants. We like going to Ginger's Asian Bistro – its close enough that we can walk there. We also like the Flying Goat and Perry Street Pizza.

What are your guilty pleasures?

It's funny, my sister says I was an adult when I was eight years old. I am definitely a person that reads a lot of books or articles on business, but also on government and government issues. Probably a little too much; I don't set it down and get away from it enough. Probably the one thing that lets my mind release the most is snow skiing. I've skied since I was two.

What role does your faith play in your life?

It's big. It was a big part of my childhood. In fact, I'm having lunch today with my pastor. It keeps you grounded and when times are both tough and good; it makes you know what's important, or at least that's how I personally see it. That active role that my faith plays in my life helps me make sure I'm doing the right thing.

Are there any perks to the job?

I grew up in the St. Patrick's Day Parade; my family has been in the parade for 35-plus years. But this year is the most exciting; we're going to be the Grand Marshals of the parade. We're pretty excited. I was married in a kilt (it is the tartan from County Cork, where his grandparents lived). I'm probably one of the only guys who spent more money on his wedding outfit than his wife, but at least I get to wear mine every year – I'm wearing it for the parade.

Any final thoughts to share with us?

At the end of the day, I am a dad with two kids, I'm a husband, I'm the son of two great parents. Whether I became mayor or not, or whether I run again or am elected again, I'm staying in Spokane. This is where my heart is. I've quite purposely chosen to live here and hope to live here the rest of my life. 