

Ypsilanti City Council Election of 1978

BY JOHN HARRINGTON

A Council Divided

In 1978, I was a high school teacher at the Regional Career Technical Center (RCTC), the vocational arm of the Ypsilanti Public Schools. We served students from Ypsilanti High School, Willow Run, and Lincoln schools. I was a member of the Ypsilanti Heritage Foundation and owned a historic home on North Huron Street.

At the time the city had five wards with two representatives, each elected every other year. The mayor was elected in a citywide campaign. Everyone had a two-year term. The council was made up of eleven members.

George Goodman was the mayor. The rest of the Ypsilanti City Council had some very notable members like Nathalie Edmunds, Pete Murdock, Jerome Strong, Charlie Kettles, Doug Harris, and Tom Moors. The council was evenly split between two groups, the pro-business and the socialist caucuses. The battle was always raging to see who had enough votes to pass their agenda.

Entering Politics

Eric Jackson had been a city council member in the past and had decided to run again. He had proposed a bill called "Rent Control." The bill essentially said if you were a landlord and had rental property you could not raise rents on your property without permission from a newly appointed rent-control board. The ward I lived in was made up of half student rentals and half property owners. Voter turnout was generally low. The rent-control proposal was being put on the November ballot along with council elections. Many student renters liked the idea of rent control. Most property owners were fearful of more city intervention and greater deterioration of property throughout the city.

Against this backdrop, Nathalie Edmunds approached me about running for city council. I had been involved in East Lansing politics but never as a candidate. Natha-



Personal Background

- Property owner**
- Family man.**
- Teacher at Ypsilanti Public Schools.**
- Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Science degree from Michigan State University.**
- Member of Ypsilanti Heritage Foundation.**
- Chairman 1979 of Historic House Tour**

lie, George Goodman, and Tom Moors pushed for me to run on an anti-rent control platform. As a property owner and a landlord, I agreed to run.

The first few steps of being a candidate were easy. Getting signatures for the nominating petition, producing a brochure, sending out letters to voters in the ward, and, surprisingly, raising money were all quite easy. The hard part was going door-to-door to visit every voter in the ward. I would try to do two to three streets every night, between six and nine in the evening. My goal was to introduce myself and listen to voter concerns.

The key piece of my campaign against rent control was an opinion letter that was published in the *Ann Arbor News* written by an employee of Eastern Michigan University who had lived in New York City where rent control was in effect. It was very well-written and laid out clearly all the problems rent control caused.

The election resulted in a record turnout in our ward and an overwhelming defeat of the rent-control proposal. I won the election by a two-to-one margin over Eric Jackson, with the largest voter count in the history of the ward. The same Eric Jackson was also a mayoral candidate in a future election.

Reflections

Most of my time on the Ypsilanti City Council was spent dealing with local matters. I sat next to Jerome Strong, and even though he and I were usually on opposite sides of most issues, we became friends. The major event of my time on council was replacing the city attorney Ron Egnor with attorney John Barr, who continues to represent the city today.


My experiences on council were both interesting and time consuming. Working full-time as a high school teacher and grappling with city issues consumed all my time. In the summer of 1980, I moved to Upstate New York to pursue a graduate degree, and I had to resign my seat on council five months before the end of my term. Overall, I enjoyed my time in city government, especially the people I met and dealt with. It is an experience I will always remember.

elect city councilmember

ERIC JACKSON

Human Rights Party For

MAYOR



A Community Activist for Social Change

- * YPSILANTI CITY COUNCIL MEMBER
- * AUTHOR OF CAMPAIGN REFORM AND EQUAL RIGHTS BALLOT PROPOSALS
- * PUBLICITY COORDINATOR, YPSILANTI MARIJUANA INITIATIVE (1974)
- * ACTIVE MEMBER, YPSILANTI FOOD CO-OP
- * STAFF MEMBER, NEW VOICE COMMUNITY NEWSPAPER
- * MEMBER OF PEOPLE'S COALITION FOR JOBS
- * VOLUNTEER WORKER, YPSILANTI TENANTS UNION (1972)
- * MEMBER, YPSILANTI COMMUNITY CONCERNS COMMITTEE
- * MEMBER, UNITED FARM WORKERS AFL-CIO BOYCOTT COMMITTEE
- * ACTIVE IN STATE, COUNTY, AND NATIONAL THIRD PARTY MOVEMENT
- * ANTI-WAR ACTIVIST, CURRENTLY WORKING WITH INDOCHINA PEACE CAMPAIGN

A Program for Action

- * COMMUNITY CONTROL OF POLICE
- * AN END TO POLICE HARASSMENT OF LABOR UNIONS, YOUNG PEOPLE, THE BLACK COMMUNITY
- * ADOPT RENT CONTROL, STRICT NEW HOUSING CODE

Eric Jackson campaign flyer, 1978

As a result of a new City of Ypsilanti charter, adopted in 1994, a three-ward system was adopted that is still in effect today. Each ward has two representatives who serve four-year terms, each elected at two-year intervals. The mayor is determined in a citywide campaign, and he or she also serves a four-year term. Today, Ypsilanti City Council has seven members.

A Note on Sources

Images are provided by the author.

About the Author

In addition to being a member of Ypsilanti City Council, John was an Ypsilanti High School teacher, owner of one of the North Huron Street Quirk/Cornwell mansions, president of the Towner House Restoration Project, member of the Heritage Foundation, Ypsilanti Historical Society and was co-owner, with his wife, of Standard Printing.