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2016 MUNICIPAL ELECTION

Skala would shift focus to residents' priorities in third City Council term

KELSI ANDERSON Mar 30, 2016



MICHAEL CALI

Karl Skala reads the name of a classical French song off the back of a CD on March 3 at KOPN radio, where the Third Ward city councilman hosts "Morning Ayre" on Thursday mornings.

COLUMBIA — The Chanticleer ensemble's rendition of "Mater Patris et filia" drifts through the KOPN's green-walled studio while Karl Skala shuffles around in preparation for his morning radio program. Just outside, Broadway is dark and silent.

Once he's in the the chair with headphones on, Skala speaks into the microphone. "It's 6:14 a.m., and you're listening to KOPN, your community radio."

Skala, the Third Ward Columbia city councilman who is seeking re-election on April 5, remembers his family getting a season pass to the Lyric Opera of Chicago when he was 14 or 15. He would don a three-piece suit and a bowler and sit in a box seat to hear the orchestra.

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These days, he's traded the black-tie getup for his signature photographer vest and turtleneck and the velvet seats for a nameplate in the Columbia City Council chambers. But that early interest he had in music has remained. He hosts the classical music program "Morning Ayre" on KOPN from 5:30 to 8 a.m. on Thursdays.

On those mornings, Skala gets up early to map out the playlist for the day. "It's a lot of fun because nobody tells me what to play," he said.

On Feb. 18, Skala had chosen a flute theme with a dash of cello and chamber music. He had a handful of CDs he brought from home. The station has an impressive collection, but so does Skala. With several hundred discs of his own to choose from, he hardly has to make use of KOPN's library. Today's picks include renditions from Michala Petri and the BBC Symphony Orchestra.

Outside KOPN, Skala and his wife, Mahree Skala, often go on vacation to attend music festivals. One of his recent trips was to the Tanglewood Music Festival, where he listened to famous cellist Yo-Yo Ma. "Casals was better, but he's also not living."

Issues old and new

Skala remembers his first brush with civic involvement in high school, when he ran for vice president of the student council alongside a boy who was running for president.

"Part of his platform was that he was gonna get rid of sports in high school," Skala said.

"Well, that didn't work out very well. We didn't win."

Talking to a crowd of supporters at a Feb. 23 fundraiser in the basement of Bleu Restaurant, Skala said his platform now centers around what most concerns Columbia residents.

"These are the promises you make on the campaign trail every year: You make promises on public safety, you make promises on infrastructure, you make promises on jobs," Skala told the crowd. "This year it's a little different."

Skala said those three foundations of his platform line up with those in the city's strategic plan, which is based on residents' strongest concerns. He said he thinks his record on the City Council over the past few years shows he has worked to make good on those promises.

One example he cited was the city's success in adding nine new Police Department officer positions and five Fire Department positions over the past three years despite voters' refusal to pass a property tax that would have helped with funding.

"That's something tangible that we didn't even get an additional revenue stream for," Skala said. "And I think under the circumstances, that's pretty good."

However, in addition to those core issues, this year he's also taking up economic disparity, an issue the city has worked to address since releasing a three-year strategic plan in September to reduce inequality between Columbia residents.

"It's what I call 'a fighting chance,' which refers to making it possible for everybody to share in this town," Skala said. "There are some underserved areas that have been neglected classically in favor of areas that either have more influence and or more money and or more votes."

Skala said that, though Columbia has a long way to go, the city's plan to focus resources into improving economic equality in three targeted neighborhood areas is a good step in the right direction.

This is Skala's fourth election, and it's the first time he won't be running against former Third Ward Councilman Gary Kespohl. All three of his contests with Kespohl were close, with Skala winning twice and Kespohl once, in 2010. Skala attributes that defeat to the Kespohl campaign's criticism of his travel at city expense and a surf-and-turf dinner he ordered during a conference, though it was found that his travel expenses never exceeded his annual allowance.

"To this day," Skala said, "I will not eat anything that the city offers at one of our meetings."

Civic commitment

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Skala holds regular hours at the Daniel Boone City Building and tries to make himself available to constituents. He can be found at the Coffee Zone from 9:30 to 11:30 a.m. on Saturdays before council meetings to talk with residents about whatever is on their minds.

Although the venue has changed over time, Skala has kept this tradition for nine years, even during the three years that Kespohl was representing the Third Ward.

"I said: 'This is too important. I can't stop doing this.'"

Skala ranks among Columbia's civically obsessed, a trait he thinks is crucial for an effective council member. He said it's easy to represent residents when 75 percent or 80 percent hold the same opinion.

"The tough part is when you get a situation where half of your constituents that voted you in office say 'yes,' and the other half say 'no,'" Skala said. He cited Columbia's polarizing transmission line issue as an example in which the community is split.

In those cases, he said, a council member can't avoid making half of the people angry, so he or she should have an especially good reason for doing it.

That's where extensive knowledge of the issues comes in, and it's why Skala is constantly reading about and studying city government matters. He's long been active with the National League of Cities, and this year he achieved the diamond level in its Certificate of Achievement in Leadership Program.

Mahree Skala said her husband takes council work very seriously. "He works very hard to make things better in the Third Ward."

Skala said he's become more efficient at City Council work. The job used to take him 40 hours or more a week; now it takes 30 to 35. The work is challenging but fun, he said.

'Serious fun'

Part of Skala's interest in civic affairs stems from his science background. He retired as director of MU's Swine Hormone Research Core eight years ago.

"I'm a psychologist. From my point of view, it's all about group dynamics," Skala said. He is fascinated by how people work together to solve a problem, and he said he has "never had more fun" than the time he was summoned for jury duty.

"It's 'serious' fun, but it's the kind of thing that you watch how people make consequential decisions, and you try and do your best to make sure that those decisions are the right ones," he said. "In real-time, on the dais, that's kind of fun."

Kurt Albert, a supporter who attended the Bleu Restaurant fundraiser, praised Skala's hard work and the time he's invested in the council.

"He doesn't have an actual job. This is his full-time job. ... He's a natural, he loves it, and he's involved," Albert said. "There are people who that's what they're born for. And that's Karl."

Rob Rasmussen, who ran for the First Ward council seat last year, donated to Skala's campaign. He said he would vote for him if he lived in the Third Ward.

"He makes pragmatic but progressive decisions. He really seems like he's in for the long haul," Rasmussen said. "I feel like he weighs the issues fairly."

Sixth Ward Councilwoman Betsy Peters also donated to Skala's campaign. She thinks he does a good job representing the Third Ward.

"I think (his commitment is) part of being a good councilperson," Peters said. "And his years of service mean that he knows a lot of the history of the city and how things work."

Although it's hard work, Skala said, one of the most rewarding parts of being a councilman happens after he researches a divisive issue and comes to a difficult decision.

"Then someone sends an email that says: 'You know, I was very disappointed that you voted a certain way, but I appreciate the fact that you really dug into it and made a decision,'" he said.

That people can disagree with him but still respect his rationale is gratifying.

"That's the best thing that can ever happen to you in this job."

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