

Landfill fight was a key issue in primary October 13, 2011 by [Joe Killian](#)



H. Scott Hoffmann (News & Record)

Photo Caption: Yvonne Johnson has the backing of former Greensboro mayor Keith Holliday in her bid for an at-large city council seat. Here, they watch as primary election results flow in Tuesday at the Guilford County Courthouse.

GREENSBORO — As City Council candidates gathered to watch primary returns Tuesday night, where they stood in the room said a lot about where they stood in the polls.

In one of the most partisan nonpartisan races in recent memory, Democrats and moderate Republicans seem to have joined to counter the current council's conservative bloc.

Mingling and congratulating each other, they stood in sharp contrast to conservative candidates, who sat apart or simply didn't show at the Old Guilford County Courthouse, an election-night tradition.

Former Mayor Yvonne Johnson, the night's top vote-getter, sat near the center of the courthouse's Blue Room, flanked by fellow candidates in her at-large race. Several hugged and celebrated with her.

Mayor Bill Knight, who took 33 percent of the vote in a five-way race, spent most of the evening behind a table at the back of the room with his campaign manager. He took an occasional cellphone call but didn't interact much with the crowd.

Few of his fellow conservative candidates were in the election-night crowd, which included city, county and state elected officials. Those who were there didn't huddle with Knight.

His opponent, Councilman Robbie Perkins, showed up later in the evening but spent much of his time chatting with supporters and fellow candidates as he watched nearly 48 percent of the vote come to him.

Rebecca Klase, a political science professor at Greensboro College, said a slate of liberal and moderate candidates were being pushed as a team. They were drawn together — and helped — by the issues they shared irrespective of their individual party affiliation, she said.

“There were some connections between (at-large candidates) Yvonne Johnson, Marikay Abuzuaiter, Wayne Abraham and (mayoral candidate) Robbie Perkins,” Klase said. “They were all out front during the landfill issue.”

The City Council's fight over whether to reopen the White Street Landfill, the campaign's most controversial issue, seemed to have inspired a large primary turnout — especially among voters in east Greensboro.

The 11 percent of registered voters who cast ballots in the primary was up from 6 percent in 2009.

George Gilbert, director of the Guilford County Board of Elections, said the turnout in District 2, in the northeast part of the city, was low two years ago.

“It probably more than doubled this year,” he said.

Michael Picarelli, executive director of the Guilford County Republican Party, said the more conservative candidates found themselves on the defensive on the landfill issue.

“Once we saw the groups that were opposing the landfill get together and merge and start working together, we knew the turnout was going to be large,” Picarelli said.

From now until the general election in November, Picarelli said conservative candidates should try to get out in front of the issue.

“I think what we saw is that they do need to go out there and explain themselves to voters,” he said. “They could have done that better with the landfill.”

Picarelli said some of the conservative candidates appeared to take a page from conservative political strategist Karl Rove.

“Rove says you don't go to places where people aren't likely to vote for you anyway. You don't try to change the minds of individuals” Picarelli said. “You turn out the people you know you can get. You get them to the polls.”

Picarelli said he agreed with that strategy, which led some candidates to turn down invitations to public forums and events where they'd face criticism.

"But maybe now it's time to be having a conversation with some of those voters and address the record, stand clear on what they did and why," Picarelli said.

Perkins said he thinks voters are being drawn to candidates who can work together, ending an "us vs. them" mentality that has prevailed on the council in the past two years.

"If you had to identify a need right now in the city, it's someone who can work together with everybody in a positive way," Perkins said.

Johnson spent 16 years on the council before her defeat as mayor two years ago. Perkins worked with her for 12 of those years and said no one is better at bringing people together.

He said if both of them are elected in November, he hopes it's something they can do together.