

## '5 Questions With' Katie Gallagher, mayor of the City of Brooklyn

McDonald Hopkins Public Law Practice Group presents



5 QUESTIONS WITH

**KATIE GALLAGHER**

Mayor | City of Brooklyn, Ohio

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**Developing relationships in Cleveland is a hugely important responsibility when you're trying to position your community well in the region,** especially when it's an older, solidly middle-class community that's already largely built out. My ultimate responsibility is to my neighbors in Brooklyn, the people who have now twice put me in this position, but being responsible to them means thinking in a way that isn't insular.

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| Monday, October 19, 2020

### **1. You're in your second term leading an inner-ring suburb of Cleveland. What has time taught you about your approach to governing in this environment?**

Developing relationships in Cleveland is a hugely important responsibility when you're trying to position your community well in the region, especially when it's an older, solidly middle-class community that's already largely built out. My ultimate responsibility is to my neighbors in Brooklyn, the people who have now twice put me in this position, but being responsible to them means thinking in a way that isn't insular. As goes Cleveland, so goes Westlake, so goes Cleveland Heights and so goes Brooklyn. Part of my job fighting for Brooklyn, is working closely with public- and private-sector leaders all over northeast Ohio to lift all ships.

### **2. Can you give an example of this kind of thinking, looking outside your city limits?**

Two examples come to mind off the bat. We've joined the Chagrin Valley Dispatch, a council of 26 governments that provides regional emergency dispatch services to its member communities. It's not a perfect system because regional dispatchers – who already have a tough job – need to learn the geography and nuances of each community they serve, but it's led to cost savings because we haven't had to house and employ our own dispatch staff at considerable taxpayer expense. And frankly they're good at what they do. The regional model works well in this regard.

The second example is how we've pivoted our old, closed municipal landfill – 75 acres of vacant land we can't otherwise put to good use – into a solar-power generation site that serves the entire Cuyahoga County government. We were sitting on literally a pile of useless trash and now we're landlords, earning rent that benefits our taxpayers while our tenant generates clean energy to power county buildings. If politicians don't have a mindset that involves using our opportunities to serve the greater community, that deal doesn't happen.

### **3. Brooklyn was once rightly or wrongly thought of as a ‘company town,’ home to American Greetings’ world headquarters. How does a mayor respond when a major employer uproots?**

When American Greetings left in 2016, out the door walked about 20 percent of our general fund income tax revenue. You can’t sugarcoat that kind of loss, but you also can’t dwell on it. We began immediately building reserves to buffer the government against the job loss and its impact on our service to our constituents, and then we immediately went to work redeveloping that property. We’ve worked hand-in-hand with the new owner of the campus, employing varying strategies to attract tenants and make deals happen – everything from community reinvestment area agreements to job creation incentives to modest tax-increment financing deals that improve the site.

The results are measurable: the space is now brimming with new tenants large and small, including the largest tenant, Medical Mutual of Ohio, and innovative businesses like TRG Multimedia. The entire site is being put to creative uses and bustling again, and I expect even more news soon on what’s happening there. In any event, no longer do we wake up worrying about the effects of a single enterprise leaving our city. We’re very proud of this accomplishment and it’s been a real collaboration among the property owner, the tenants, city council and my administration.

### **4. What keeps mayors up at night?**

It’s nothing new to worry about the effects of the coronavirus pandemic on a community, and we’re no exception. The job losses nationwide are staggering, and Brooklyn’s income tax revenue’s won’t be immune from rising unemployment.

But mayors in Ohio communities that have any decent commercial tax base – those in all municipalities except the strictly bedroom communities – are also dealing with the threat of their own state legislature yanking the rug out from beneath them. How? With bills like S.B. 352 and H.B. 754, both currently pending in Columbus, each of which would dramatically upend how we’ve been collecting income taxes throughout the pandemic. If these bills are passed, they’d discontinue income tax payments made to employers’ cities as their employees work remotely from home.

Municipalities like Brooklyn with a large commuter tax base stand to lose millions overnight. One estimate reflects that certain municipalities in the region could lose a staggering 65 percent of their income tax base if legislation like this passes. In Brooklyn, the percentage would likely be smaller – but it’s still significant enough that we feel like we’re staring down the barrel of a gun every day this legislation remains pending.

The pandemic is difficult enough to deal with. We’re having to negotiate and renegotiate union contracts and economic-development incentives in a hugely uncertain time, all while trying to maintain a level of service that maintains our citizens’ confidence in their government. We’ve gotten good support from our legislature with regard to federal relief dollars, but we don’t want to wake up each day fighting our friends in Columbus over measures, like these, that could bankrupt us overnight.

### **5. How will this pandemic change the way local government operates?**

One thing we’ve come to appreciate right away is the value of flexibility – with our citizens, with our business community and with our employees. The pandemic has forced us to move far and quickly away from how we’ve always done things. Citizens are hunkered down and we’ve had to find new ways to reach them. Businesses are rethinking space requirements and rent obligations and whether to stay open

## 5 Questions With Katie Gallagher, mayor of the Cit

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or closed. Employees need ultimate leeway to keep elderly parents safe, to care for children and to ensure their kids are safe and educated. We've learned we must communicate and over-communicate with all our stakeholders so they feel confident knowing things are getting done while the world around them seems so topsy-turvy.

Government is often rightly criticized for being monolithic and immutable, but the pandemic teaches us we can't afford to abide by old tropes and ways of working. We have to be increasingly creative, innovative, and communicative. It's a challenge we cannot afford to ignore if we're going to do right by those who've asked us to serve them.