

## Debi Starnes Exits with a Legacy of Community Service

For three terms, Debi Starnes has represented District 2, which includes most of Castleberry Hill north of Fair Street, on the Atlanta City Council. But come November, there will be someone else in that seat.

While she will miss being actively engaged in the debate on important issues and being the person that figures out how to solve problems for her communities, “Twelve years is a long time to serve in a ‘part-time’ position that can really take almost all of your time,” she said. “My daughter was 2 years old when I was first elected, and she starts Grady High School this month – I want to have enough time to enjoy those years with her. And, I feel a need to just slow down, period, and live a life where I can try to do one thing at a time, instead of juggling three or four things.” Debi, who holds a Ph.D. in community psychology, has a professional practice and also manages the firm, and she and her husband run a bed and breakfast in their historic Inman Park home.

As a Council member and private citizen, Debi has worked to implement programs to reduce drugs and violence in Atlanta’s public housing communities, encourage homeless and runaway youngsters to remain in school, prevent teen pregnancy, increase the number of children who are immunized, facilitate transportation for cancer patients needing treatment, curb child abuse, and facilitate housing and services for people with AIDS.

Debi says she is proud of the community development planning and implementation that the District’s neighborhoods have done, but she is most proud of the progress the City has made in planning for and serving the needs of the homeless population. “When I came into office,” she recalled, “there was really one agency that was monopolizing the dialogue about homelessness, and all that was being done was warehousing people in substandard settings and giving them ‘3 hot’s and

a cot.’ Over these years, I have organized all the homeless providers, the business community, the faith community and the government agencies to do a better job. During this same time period, HUD [the US Department of Housing and Urban Development] improved their approach to helping the homeless, and we were ready to make these changes with them.

“We now have a full continuum of care,” she continued, “and are building facilities and services to fill the gaps we identified, so that I believe we can say, for the first time ever, that any person who wants to get ‘un-homeless,’ we can help them through that journey. We can work with a person to assess what it will take to get them into the right kind of housing and into a self-sufficient lifestyle. And, I might add, almost all the homeless services and facilities are in District 2 – the most recent being Genesis Shelter, Trinity House, Hope House and the Gateway Center – and I am proud of our residents and communities for being gracious hosts, while at the same time, demanding that these agencies be good neighbors and run quality facilities.”

Debi says it has been “a real treat” to watch Castleberry Hill grow from an area on a map into a community during her tenure. “When I was first campaigning in 1993 and going door-to-door, I had a hard time finding people in Castleberry Hill – I actually had a hard time finding the doors

that led to people. When the Loft Tour began, that was a real celebration of what has been accomplished.”

Any regrets? “I wish I could have done more to insure affordable housing in our City,” she said. “District 2 probably has the greatest variety in housing choices and price-points, of any district, but the more affordable prices are disappearing fast. It is so difficult to keep a variety of housing stock, when market forces start working against you. I know Mayor Franklin



**Debi Starnes, We thank you for your dedication to Castleberry Hill!**

and Council President Borders plan on focusing on that, so I hope the next District 2 Councilperson will be committed to actively helping on that issue.”

Al Caproni, president of the Inman Park Neighborhood Association, and Kwanza Hall, a member of the Atlanta School Board, are both actively campaigning for her seat, while Michael Mills dropped out of the race at the end of June. To make sure our next representative continues the progress that is underway, Debi hopes residents will ask the candidates tough questions, such as: What are some real-world examples of what they have done that helped get something accomplished? What is their knowledge level of and commitment to full implementation of the City’s sewer plan and working with Mayor Franklin on seeing that very complicated plan through? How do they plan to work with each neighborhood? She encourages her constituents to insist on answers to their own questions about the issues that matter to them.

Debi has met with the candidates and believes they each bring individual strengths to the table. “My main advice to them,” she said, “is to take the job seriously, be responsive, but find a way to maintain a sense of humor and enjoy themselves. Otherwise, the job will make them insane!” ■

— Kate Siegel



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