

PlanPhilly: I've listened to some of the interviews that you've done, and I know that you've talked about representing the poor people's value system rather than the value system of the elites. And I know that your priorities are crime and education, but I'm wondering, in terms of the development of the city and city planning, what does it mean to represent poor people's values in that context?

Milton Street: Oh, it means a lot. An administration is only as strong as its workforce, so a mayor will not be able to have his fingers or have a hands-on approach to everything, every issue. So in terms of city planning, in terms of city development, I would hire the best mind available who's educated in that area, who specializes in that area and he'll make recommendations. And my interest would be that he did not have a policy that would elevate the taxes above poor people's ability to be able to pay. I would be concentrating on the gentrification. I wouldn't want to advance gentrification.

So even in this area here [22nd & Lehigh], we have a lot of poor people that own houses, but when we we have a lot of house that are vacant we have to figure out a plan as to how to utilize those properties that are vacant but at the same time not utilize them in a way where it displaces the people who live there. So that would be the job of the experts in that area.

So the problem that I would have would be salaries that they pay, that the city pays. They're not comfortable salaries that people get in the private industry, you know. So getting your best minds and getting people who would come and sacrifice three or four years to developing an overall comprehensive plan that would be able to enhance the city from its development because when we develop the city, and we bring in the gentry, we raise taxes, right? And it puts more money in the city coffers. At the same time, it's a catch 22. And that's catchy.

PP: So, have you seen any areas in the city where it has worked in that way?

MS: This is an area where I would counsel with my brother [John Street], who's been mayor for eight years. And his community initiative program, we would look at that and see how it worked, see if we need to tweak it any kind of way, see if it displaced people, see if it put low- and moderate-income houses in, so that the people who are low- and moderate-income could still afford to stay in the community. Assuming they could afford the houses. If they couldn't afford them because of their income, I would look for write-down moneys from the state and federal government—

[Street's phone rings.] Brian. Can I call you right back? Brian Hickey.

PP: So you were saying write-down moneys from ...

MS: Housing developments here, on 20th, they had the old osteopathic hospital years ago, probably before you were born, right down here at 20th and I think it was Susquehanna. I was able to get write-down moneys—

In other words, if the developer says this house is \$300,000, but the mortgage company wouldn't give a potential buyer the mortgage because the potential buyer's income couldn't accommodate the mortgage that would be in front of him, if he didn't have maybe \$100,000 down, so the house is now \$200,000, his salary could accommodate \$200,000 but not \$300,000 or \$250,000—so government sometimes will, in the form of grants and other forms will give write-down moneys for people. But the catch 22 on that is the tax base. So you can write down, now you can have a house. Can you afford the taxes?

It's an issue that I don't have all the expertise in in terms of working it out, but I have enough sense to know that I need some of the best minds available to help me with that.

PP: So I'm wondering what you think the role of the mayor is when it comes to things like planning the city zoning-wise, creating zoning maps, and also when it comes to redeveloping vacant lots. I think you talked about that for a second with respect to what your brother did, but I wonder what you would do in office to plan—

MS: Again, you're not going to be any weaker or stronger than your workforce. So while I may not have the expertise to explain exactly what I'd do off the top of my head, I do have the skillset to be able to understand talent. And I have, again, a family member that's been in the mayor's office, who I would probably counsel with before I hired anybody. "What about this guy? What about this plan?" You know, so I have an advantage in having a member of the family that I can go have dinner with any time, talk with any time—we do all that together—and pick his brain.

PP: Can I ask, what do you think of what Nutter's done in terms of city planning? He's tried sort of plan all the different neighborhoods piece by piece, and I'm wondering what you think of that.

MS: I haven't seen him try to plan anything.

PP: No?

MS: Name something.

PP: Well he's doing this Philadelphia2035 project, which is, the Planning Commission has been going out into the neighborhoods, having a meeting here and there, and then coming back and trying to put together a plan for the way things develop. Have you heard about this at all?

MS: Yeah, you know, to me, it's papier-mâché. It's sort of like a cotton-candy approach to everything: it has no substance, but it gives people the illusion that you're doing something when actually you're not. I would like to have something that's a little more substantive, a little more

hands-on, a little more—people in the poor community, they don't need any more talk. They need to see something tangible. And until you can give them something tangible, you have a serious problem.

But if you want to talk about developing the community and all that, the first thing you've got to do is stop the crime. If you can't stop the crime, nothing's going to [inaudible]. Because developers won't even go in there: "I don't want to mess up my money in there." Who's going to, "Well, I just graduated from school. I got straight As. I got a good degree. I'm going to raise my family. But I want to move over there where there's a lot of crime so one of them might get shot. Or I might get beat up. I wanna move over there man, so my wife, you know, she might get raped." You know, come on.

And there is absolutely—the only way that those neighborhoods have been successfully developed is they've been just recycled. They've just moved out poor people altogether, relocated them.

I'll give you a good example. When I was 18, I worked with a contractor named C.B. Buchanan. South Street looked worse than any street you could see.

PP: What decade are we talking about?

MS: '70s. We're talking about the '70s. There was a construction company called Southwark, who subcontracted a lot of work to this contractor named C.B. Buchanan. As a young teenager working my through school, I used to work with him. And we went into these buildings on South Street—you know at the time, I'm naive, I'm thinking, "What in the hell is wrong with this raggedy thing? What are you gonna do with this?" I didn't have the vision, or the understanding, or the information enough to understand that this was going to be a tourist avenue. The tourists go, "Where's South Street?" You know? I remember Jim's Steaks, he couldn't sell five steaks a day. The guy's a millionaire.

That was long-range planning at the time, obviously. I couldn't understand that. Pine Street, Spruce Street—all of them, it was ghetto. Deteriorated. It was like bombs dropped through there, war lands, war-torn. But now, you go down there now, you'll pay three, four hundred, five hundred thousand dollars for a property.

PP: And you see that as—the only way they were able to do that is by pushing the poor people out.

MS: Yeah. They couldn't afford to stay. You know, but, we use the word "push them out." But a lot of them got offered money for their properties that was beyond their wildest imagination. They don't even want to look back. "I'm taking this \$100,000 and I'm off!"

When you have somebody who's accustomed to making, at that time, \$7,000 or \$8,000 a year, somebody comes in and says, "Hey, look, I'll give you \$100,000 for your property." But there was a long-range plan because—

Even on Girard Avenue, I recall when people were paying, developers were paying \$25,000 for three-story houses and just letting them sit. Just letting them sit. Now it's Brewerytown. So ...

PP: So that's developers having sort of a long-term vision and saying, "Well, what we're gonna do down the line is change this whole neighborhood over," but you're saying the city should be able to—

MS: It's not only—developers, and the city have a relationship. Because the city needs money to operate the city, it gets most of its money from taxes. So the city says, "Well, this property here sitting vacant is not worth anything to me. This guy may be able to raise it so I can get 15, 20 thousand dollars a year in taxes"—a long-range plan.

So we're sitting there in the '70s, and by the year 2000, we can anticipate that we're gonna get an additional 100, 200, 300 million in taxes by refurbishing these houses and bringing in people who are financially capable of being able to meet that kind of tax burden. If you go right down on 29th Street, I remember, and this is years ago, there was—the head of the Philadelphia Planning Commission was a guy named Bernard Metlzer. I don't if you—

PP: The name rings a bell.

MS: So we're talking about recycling and gentrification and all that and obviously because he was on the Planning Commission we had to talk to him. And he's selling us a lot of bullshit, and so finally I took a ride down Pennsylvania Avenue and I was going up 29th Street, and I saw all this development down there, this is owned an operated by Bernard Meltzer. And I said [laughs]—I had to stop and look at that sign, I don't believe this. All those houses, all those properties—I mean that was really, really ghetto housing.

So that was a long-range plan, and those guys, they made money. At the same time, the city made money, and there's a place for poor people. But the city's got to run, it's got to operate, it needs money to operate. So you have to create that balance. And creating that balance is not easy. You get criticized. But there is a way that you can kind of create that balance by preserving some of the existing real estate stock, by not allowing all of the existing real estate stock to be recycled or be redeveloped.

PP: That was the other question I was about to ask you, was, do you think the city should focus on developing new affordable housing or preserving existing affordable housing?

MS: It has to have some affordable housing. But the way I would attempt to have affordable housing is keeping costs down by preserving what we already have for low- and moderate-income people. If you don't have to bring developers in and you have to figure out a way now to intermix with the aesthetic appearance of the community, right? You've got to—you have a house that was built in the early 1900s as opposed to houses being built now, you have 100-year-old houses out there, how do you refurbish those houses, not many of them are what you call brownstones, so you keep costs down and make them affordable for low- and moderate-income.

It's a complex issue. And it's an issue that—

[Phone rings. Street rejects the call.]

It's an issue that can't be just explained off the top of your head without doing some serious, serious ...

PP: Alright, well I won't take up too much of your time, but I've got a couple more questions. Some of your fellow candidates have had various proposals around—

[Phone rings.]

Do you want to take this? I can pause this.

MS: No, man, this is a pain in the ass.

PP: Candidates have had proposals about changing or extending the 10-year tax abatement, which was I think put in place right before your brother was in office, and I'm wondering what you think about that program.

MS: Yeah, you know, I'm very, very reluctant to put proposals in—

[Phone rings.]

PP: I can pause it.

MS: No. You know, some people, they just want to talk.

PP: Sure. Sure enough. I know a few myself.

MS: But in any event, you take these tax abatement things, and you put them in writing, and then the press people they later come back and say, "Oh, this is what you said then." The political arena is fluid. Things change. But what I would do is, before I would give—and I don't have a problem with putting this in writing—tax abatements should be associated with some type of employment and opportunity for poor people.

We've got the Gallery now where you've got \$52 million tax abatement [inaudible]—but I haven't seen any proposal that states, "Well, you've got construction, you have entry-level jobs, where before you can get this tax abatement, you have to—" Excuse me one second.

Hey Andre. Andre. Call [name] and tell her that I'm in an interview.

Andre: She a reporter?

MS: No, man ... just a hemorrhoid. Give me one second man. I'm sorry.

[Recording paused]

PP: You were saying that the city needs to make sure that the city needs to have an opportunity for poor people if they're giving out tax abatements.

MS: Yeah, and there's two reasons for that. Number one, they need the jobs. And number two, you're never going to get poor people to participate in the electoral process until they get some result. There's got to be a result. There's got to be a benefit. But you have a whole class of people who can't get jobs. When I say class, you have re-entries, about 300,000 re-entry people, and you have veterans that can't find work. And you have, a lot of them have mental-health issues. I have to sort those out. But if you give somebody a tax abatement, they can't use the fact that somebody has a felony—a non-violent felony—as a reason not to hire them.

So I would have a clause in there where the recommendation for hiring would come directly from the mayor's office. And if the employer had a problem, that problem would be referred to the mayor's office to resolve, not a direct firing from the developer. Come on, we're giving you millions of dollars in tax breaks, you've got to work with us and help develop this community, and stabilize it and give them an income.

PP: So the last thing I want to ask is, you've talked a little bit about some biking stuff in the past and some of our readers are interested in the biking thing, and I'm wondering if you think the city should focus on improving the street infrastructure so there's better bike lanes.

MS: Absolutely. Absolutely, man. I would emphasize that. As a matter of fact, I would get with—there's two major cycling companies I would get with. Number one, Philadelphia Cycling over there ... and Breakaway Bikes. These are guys who are into cycling. Cycling I love because no matter your age it's not that hard on your joints, as opposed to jogging and doing other things. So I would have a major, major, major health program.

People have to have health. They have to maintain their health. We can't stop the aging process, because it's a natural thing, but you can put yourself in a position to be functional. Because when

we get a certain age is when we have all the experiences to share with young people. My experiences won't help me. I've got to pass them on.

So what's interesting to me is, when you pick up the Sunday paper, all the employers want experience, you know, but when you get guys, they say, "Oh you've got too much experience. You're too old." "Hey I've got a lot of experience!" "Yeah, but you're too old." "I'm too old to share my experience?" That doesn't make a lot of sense, you know.

PP: So when it comes to actual street infrastructure, though, do you think City Council should be the ones making calls about whether there's bike lanes, do you think the mayor's office should be making calls—

MS: I think that the streets that are controlled by the city, the city should make the call. I think that the streets that are controlled by the state, like Broad Street, Allegheny Avenue, some other ones are controlled by the state, I don't know whether we have the legal authority to set up a bike lane in there. I don't think that there would be any opposition, but I wouldn't blanketly say that I would do that and then all of a sudden, the state's saying, "No, no, no, no."

I'll give you a good example. I had said this to one of the Council people. I said, "You're going to run into a problem with those signs you're putting up there. That's run by the state, man." "Oh, nah, nah, nah." I said, "You watch." They got that stuff out there, and then all of a sudden, bam. But I knew that was going to happen. Or I anticipated it. You can't ever know. But they didn't get state authority for that, and if they had done their homework they would have known that there was federal moneys tied to—and you know, it's just complicated.

...

PP: Alright. Well, this has been good talking to you, and is there anything else you want to talk about before I let you go on to the rest of your day?

MS: What's interesting to me, and a lot of people really don't really wrap their heads around it, there's issues—I'm so proud of being involved in this, because there's issues being discussed that would never be discussed if I wasn't in it. Stop and frisk. Kenney would never be talking about stop and frisk.

He had made statements that Ramsey was the best commissioner that Philadelphia ever had. You know, he's talking about, "If he's good for the President, he's good for me." I said, "Send him on down there with the president." The president's children don't have the problems that these kids have up here. They've got FBI—they're secure.

The issue of police enforcement is not an issue of training police. It's nowhere near that. What it is is an issue of community civic organizations being strong. Where there are strong community

civic organizations, there's no violence, and there's no police shootings. Maybe an exception if they have an issue. The issue in those districts where these 394 police shootings took place, and where stop and frisk took place, are in communities that are not organized and it's not technically a community. It's just a group of people who live together, because a community controls its institutions, its economics and its politics—they're just there. A lot of renters, a lot of transient people.

So you have all this illegal activity going on because there's no boundaries. There's no civic organization. There's nobody within the community that says, "Hold on, you're out of bounds. No, we don't have that here." So you have to bring police in to try to set some order. And that's what's needed: organization of community.

And the second part of it is, when you have a group of people—whether they're black, white, green, or yellow—who shoot each other, and are allowed to shoot each other without any internal repercussions, then if I hire you as a policeman and send you over there, the first thing your parents will tell you and everybody else: "Be careful, son, they shoot each other over there."

So you hire these young people, 20, 21, and you set them down here in the middle of North Philly, they're already mentally in an area where you get shot. If you're walking across a field and somebody says, "There's a lot of rattlesnakes out there," you'll be looking for the snakes. As soon as you hear a rattle, you're going to start shooting. Doesn't necessarily have to be a snake, right? The wind could blow a can.

But my point is you can't blame police for framing an attitude that was created by the environment that they're going into. So I'm going to respond to that environment. So while we put the emphasis on police officers, who I believe are good people, I really do... You have 6,525 police, you have 461 or something like that who are involved in shootings. So you've got over 6,000 good police officers; why would you malign and scandalize the whole police department because Ramsey and the mayor couldn't manage 461? If I had a school with over 6,000 students, and only 461 of them failed, it would be pretty successful.

So the police aren't the problem. What has to happen is, you have to have a civic organization, or a separate community review board in each district because the districts are so different. So you can't have one citywide civilian review board. They have to be district-based. And you establish a trust and a relationship with the police in that district, because everyone's different. So that's the emphasis of my 414 community movement to stop the violence. We'll hire people from the community where they live to patrol the community where they live and connect it directly with the Police Department to serve as a quick response and prevention tool. And they will not only be on the street to do that, they'll identify abandoned houses, they'll clean out alleys, put the trash

on the sidewalk for the trash people. You know, when the trash people come along and put half in the bucket and half in the street, they'll clean it up. We could control with all that.

[To a McDonald's customer Street recognized.] Hey! How you doing?

Customer: Good and yourself?

MS: I'm ready. You ready?

Customer: I'm ready. Have a blessed one.

MS: OK. [Back to interview] So, you know, I just really get upset when you have—and I know Jim Kenney, he served—

[Another customer approaches. Short conversation ensues.]

PP: Alright, well I've taken up twice as much time as I said I would, so I'll let you go, but I appreciate you talking.

MS: No problem, man.

[Recording ends. Street continues talking. Recording starts again, with Street in mid-sentence talking about his opponents.]

MS: News clips, they'll respond to these little sentences, like Williams: "I want a city where hope thrives, poverty dies." Boy, that's a good one [laughs]. It doesn't make any sense. But unfortunately, when you represent the poor, you don't raise enough money to respond to that stuff. And if you have a commitment or a passion or a purpose, you don't sell yourself for some money to abandon your purpose.

But I think it's going to be a surprise election.

PP: You think so?

MS: From what I'm feeling out here on the street, people are tired of the same-old quote-unquote B.S. I've had people tell me, "Milton, if you weren't in, I wasn't even going to vote." A lot of them, not just a few of them. So they have these debates, they don't even answer the questions, they just talk a lot of politics. Rather than talking to people, they're talking politics. And people are picking up on it. I just don't think you can ignore people for a long period of time and don't feel, at some point, they're going to rise up and fight back. And fight back.