

Decision Time

JASON MOON WILKINS It's Decision Time Nashville. A mayor will be chosen Sept. 12, and the two in the runoff, incumbent David Briley and Councilman John Cooper, have been making their case to voters.

MAYOR DAVID BRILEY My name is David Briley. I was born and raised here in Nashville. I spent the last 22 years fighting for progressive causes.

COUNCILMAN JOHN COOPER I'm John Cooper. I'm currently a councilman at large running for mayor, and I'm running for mayor to make it not only a Nashville for everyone but a Nashville that can be for everyone.

BRILEY And I'll fight for everyone who lives in this city.

COOPER And let's make it the greatest city in the country.

WILKINS You're listening to an hourlong special from WPLN. I'm Jason Moon Wilkins. Tonight we'll delve into how the candidates differ, probe some campaign promises, and get into details that might have been overlooked in what has been an intense runoff. The choice is up to the voters. It's either Mayor David Briley.

VOTER #1 He certainly has the pedigree to be mayor, and he has the experience with public service.

WILKINS Or Councilman John Cooper.

VOTER #2 John Cooper has the mentality of parity, and he want everything to benefit everyone in the city.

The candidates have been through numerous forums and debates, sometimes prone to drama.

BRILEY He's misled the city and pitted one part of the town against the other.

COOPER Stop this imperial mayoralty. It's not bumper car or Hunger Games management style.

WILKINS But WPLN wants to go deeper on housing, transportation, the budget and the role of the mayor. Each candidate sat down for 30 minutes to take detailed questions from reporter Tony Gonzalez.

We're going to hear extended parts of those conversations and get analysis tonight. So Tony, when it comes to elections, I think I've lost count how many we've had in the last few years.

TONY GONZALEZ Yeah. I mean it's been a lot. And there are worries about voter fatigue out there. But we've seen that turnout has actually been pretty strong during this mayor's contest. We've also seen these, the finalists really duking it out. And there is still more to try to understand as voters are going to the polls.

WILKINS So Tony, what can you say about the runoff? What's left to understand about Briley and Cooper?

GONZALEZ Yeah, Jason, I mean they've been campaigning for months, so a lot of information is out there, but there are clear differences and disagreements. And that's what we're getting into in these conversations. Just, for example, Councilman Cooper is deeply critical of the mayor's approach to affordable housing. The mayor says the councilman's own ideas are incomplete. They also differ on the next steps that Nashville should take for transportation, and they have been moving farther and farther apart on how they would find the money to fund the Metro government. So there are clear differences between these candidates.

WILKINS Well like in any campaign, they've been taking shots at each other, so you opened your interviews by giving each of them a chance to set the record straight on a claim or accusation. Let's start with David Briley.

GONZALEZ We're gonna begin with what is a pretty open-ended question. In the campaign so far, what information or claim has been out there that bothers you? This is your chance to set the record straight.

BRILEY It's clear to me that in our country and in our city in particular, there's a fair amount of anger and anxiety about the direction of the world. My opponent has found a pretty key place to tap into that anger, and that's when he tries to pit the development that's taking place downtown versus our neighborhoods. And he's used one particular instance in that regard, talking about the tourist development zone and trying to get money out of the tourist development zone and spend it in our neighborhoods, where the law is pretty clear that we can't do that. Now he's misled the city and pitted one part of the town against the other, and that's really a fundamental problem. It's a fundamental weakness in everything that he's trying to convince the city of. But it's tapped into something real in the community. So the record is that if you look at tourism, it's an important part of the overall economy. Lots of people work in the tourism industry. And if you look at property taxes collected downtown in the 19th county council Manik district which is essentially downtown, it's \$150 million a year, far, far more than any other part of the city. And those resources do get spent in our neighborhoods. Those property taxes do get spent to pay for teachers, for sidewalks, for libraries, for parks. And without the vital tourist industry we have downtown, we wouldn't be in the position we're in. I just think it's important to set the record straight on that issue.

WILKINS Mayor David Briley addressing one of the claims he says has been manipulated in this year's campaign. Reporter Tony Gonzalez also asked Councilman

John Cooper to weigh in on anything he feels has been inaccurate. He wanted to respond to an allegation that he accepted economic incentives.

COOPER David brought it up, this business of taking incentives. When I was a Williamson County developer, Williamson County does not do development incentives. They have found a different way of doing it. Most places in America don't do it this way in terms of sustained incentives for developers and for landlords.

So I guess I would love to have the record straight on that.

WILKINS Well you can tell some of the things said during this campaign have gotten under the candidate's skin. So we tried to get beyond the stump speeches and ask about some areas where they've been criticized. So Tony, take us into your next questions.

GONZALEZ So we decided to really tailor our questions to David Briley and to John Cooper. We identified what we would consider an Achilles heel for each of them, or at least a policy they have not fully explained or that they're still being questioned about. We're going to begin with John Cooper and the catchphrase that has really defined his campaign.

GONZALEZ You've clearly billed yourself as the neighborhood's candidate. You've suggested spending more on bus service, parks, teacher pay, better sidewalks, better drainage, more police officers for all of the neighborhoods. I have to ask: how are you going to pay for all of that?

COOPER There are more sources for money. And then, interestingly, Nashville has not had a revenue problem. We're constantly up four and a half to 5% of new revenue a year even without tapping any of the tourist sources. We've also been spending a really large amount of money in other downtown subsidies: participation agreements that end up going to very well-off large projects that really don't need any of that money. So for example, Nashville Yards. Last year we gave them an extra \$15 million. Why? It's a multi-billion-dollar project. It's really not needed to do that. That \$15 million, hey that is all of our year's new sidewalk money. And the small redirections of money end up having a huge change. Again, think of that: one downtown participation agreement which didn't need it was all of our year's new sidewalk money. All right, let's just not do that and then let's double our new sidewalk money, and then with the new sidewalk money let's write the RFQ so that we're really bringing it in an efficiency that most cities would expect.

GONZALEZ So some of your peers have crunched the numbers. Very quickly they get into the city needing more than a hundred million or hundreds of millions of dollars. Yet when we see the council looking for savings or the Blue Ribbon Commission —

COOPER Yeah.

GONZALEZ — or even something like the incentives, we're talking tens of millions. I don't understand how we get from tens of millions in savings to hundreds of millions of needs.

COOPER Well, there are more, I mean, of course there are hundreds of millions of dollars worth of needs. No city is ever able to fund all of its needs. You do the best you can with the resources that you have, and you pay for stuff out of the right pocket, and you have priorities and who gets it. So in the question of hundreds of millions of dollars, if that's really on top of already an increase of four and a half to 5% of new revenue a year, well, you've got a different set of problems.

GONZALEZ I mean, if we're talking about employee pay raises across the board, which obviously there's been a lot of attention on —

COOPER A staff increase, yes, yes.

GONZALEZ Debt requirements which are obligations —

COOPER Debt, but a step increase for all of Nashville teachers is \$8 million dollars, \$8 million. The fact that the Music City Center is an authority and doesn't pay property taxes, that property taxes there would pay for two step increases for teachers.

WILKINS That's Councilman John Cooper, defending his big promises for the city he'd like to do as mayor. Next we ask Mayor Briley to explain why so many of his proposals have been met with intense pushback. That includes one of his toughest weeks, when the city gained nationwide attention for allowing the NFL Draft to chop down cherry trees to make space for a stage downtown.

GONZALEZ As a mayor, some people have been surprised by the idea of doing a land swap for the Church Street Park, this idea of a of a private firm overseeing street parking, the removal of the cherry trees downtown. Why have proposals like this from your office caught people including elected officials off guard?

BRILEY Well, I have to sort of take each one of those and look at them a little bit differently. I think some folks in the council expect for the mayor's office to be involved in each and every project and be communicating each and every detail to the council. Some of the pushback we've heard on those particular issues were essentially politics. I think people running for an office trying to get some leverage in a particular campaign.

GONZALEZ Let's grant that some of it's politics.

BRILEY Sure.

GONZALEZ Are there any things that you might do differently going forward in terms of transparency or maybe any lessons learned about rolling out some of these types of things?

BRILEY Well, we can talk about the NFL Draft in particular. I think the lesson learned there was not so much about the trees. I think people were, and certainly people were unnerved by the fact that we were losing trees. I think it was more a sense that somebody from out of town could come in and tell us what to do with our city. And so that was certainly something we have to be more sensitive to and be better communicators about the fact that that's not the way we operate and and make sure that folks understand that.

WILKINS David Briley explaining how he's responded to criticism this year. You're listening to Decision Time, an hourlong election special. After a short break, we'll turn to Councilman Cooper and one of the biggest promises the councilman has made and then altered during the campaign. I'm Jason Wilkins. You're listening to 90.3 WPLN.

[00:11:11] **STEVE SWENSON** Hi, this is Steve Swenson, president and CEO of Nashville Public Radio. The special show you are listening to is an important piece of our public service mission. We want to be an island of civility in a world that has become polemic and full of name calling. Tonight's shows part of what we do best at WPLN: quality, serious, civil discourse on issues important to our community. As a local civic news organization, we can only do that with your help. Please make a donation on behalf of local independent journalism at wpln.org/give.

WILKINS As Nashville voters choose the next mayor, WPLN brought the candidates in for interviews to tackle some of the toughest topics the campaign has raised. I'm Jason Moon Wilkins. This is Decision Time.

Councilman John Cooper has touted himself as a watchdog on city spending but WPLN's Tony Gonzalez pressed him on an early promise that he has since walked back.

GONZALEZ So WPLN, and really the entire newsroom, performed a large fact check earlier during the campaign, and one of the findings was that Cooper was saying the city should spend close to half of its budget on Metro schools. That's a big promise. And when you do the math, it's a huge amount of money. Well over \$100 million extra. But later after that fact check, Cooper actually altered that promise to a much smaller dollar amount. So we asked him for some more detail.

GONZALEZ Obviously you have stressed that you are the manager, the number cruncher in the campaign. But in your early campaign materials, you had a large promise for schools' funding that —

COOPER I have a huge, huge promise.

GONZALEZ — that much more should be spent on schools. But actually after the radio station's fact check, that goal was walked back, instead of half of the city's budget to half of new revenue. So, was that an over-promise or —

COOPER Then —

GONZALEZ — did something change in the path?

COOPER Well, in talking about finance words, people can hear words differently, etc. Let's just talk about that. What I have said consistently is half of our new revenue. OK?

GONZALEZ I want to stop you there. I mean, it was on your website that we should move toward half of the city budget, and in early —

COOPER OK.

GONZALEZ — performances onstage, it was reference that way.

COOPER Well, again, let's just look at the goal, which is worthy, which is to look at your city's new revenue. Right? That is available, the money that is available, new money that is available to be spent. OK? that is new revenue. The new money that is available to be spent, and half of it should go to schools. Now you are not able to fix the number that is so far back. Right? Right now, 39 and a half percent of the city's revenue going to schools. You can't correct that. I mean, that's hundreds of millions of dollars in one year.

So you cannot do that, but you can say, half of the money available to be spent needs to go to schools. That's probably the clearest way of saying that.

WILKINS That's Councilman John Cooper responding to detailed questions from WPLN's Tony Gonzalez.

If you're just joining us, Councilman Cooper and Mayor David Briley agreed to exclusive in-depth interviews with this hourlong election show.

One issue that Cooper as a metro councilman has not had to deal with very much is policing. But Mayor Briley has. There have been police shootings, questions about management of the department and how to handle police reforms. So Tony Gonzalez asked him about the challenge of balancing these issues.

GONZALEZ You've had some public disagreements with the Fraternal Order of Police, and they have endorsed your opponents. You've also been criticized for not being supportive enough of something like police oversight. Why has policing been so hard for you to navigate?

BRILEY Well, I'm not so sure I would put it that way. I would say policing across the country right now is a significant issue that every community is struggling with to varying degrees.

I think the fact that I've been criticized from both ends of the spectrum is a pretty good indication that I've been pretty close to on the mark in terms of how I've handled policing in the city of Nashville. I've always supported community oversight of the of the police department; the very specifics of the referendum I had some concerns about. But once it was adopted, I worked hard to make sure it got implemented. When it comes to the Fraternal Order of Police, I can't really speak to how they conduct themselves. I think they have been shortsighted in many respects when it comes to what the best interests of the city are, and hopefully in the coming months and years that they'll be able to work out a better relationship with the mayor.

GONZALEZ I want to stay on this for just a moment.

BRILEY Sure.

GONZALEZ I want to broaden it out to a couple of other topics. I also think about body cameras, the length of time that's taken. I think about this video of the fatal shooting last summer, and how various officials reacted to that, and there was some concern about how you reacted to that as well. Have you made any mistakes on policing, or is there anything you would do differently given a full term dealing with policing matters?

BRILEY Well, as you know, on the on the body cams, my predecessor announced that body cams would be deployed, and I became mayor a few months after she made that announcement. And I think if I had been making the initial announcement about body cams, I would have had a better plan for implementation before I made the announcement instead of just saying, "Hey, we're gonna do this." And so I think that was something I would like to do differently. When it comes to the shooting, I think in our system here in Nashville it is, you have to be very cautious about getting out in front of the facts. And so as the facts were very, were developing at the very beginning, I think it was important for me to try and make sure everybody understood that we were going to be deliberate and thoughtful about how we address the circumstances, and to make sure that folks understood that at the end of the day, justice would be served. And when you do that, maybe you can't be as strident as you might, as you might be able to be in another role. If you're a council member or if you're an advocate, you can be much more strident about where the city needs to go. But if you're the chief executive of the city responsible for making sure that people are safe, responsible for making sure that justice is delivered, you've got to be a little bit more cautious than you can be in other roles, I think.

WILKINS That was Mayor David Briley answering questions about policing in Nashville. One of the department's key challenges has been recruiting and retaining officers. Reporter Tony Gonzalez asked him what can be done about that.

BRILEY Well as I talked to the chief, I think there are some fundamental changes taking place in policing and who wants to be a police officer. Ten, 20 years ago, when a police officer began, it would have been their plan to police for their entire life. And what we're seeing now is more and more people after 10 years or five years or 15 years saying,

"Oh, I'm going to move on to something else." Additionally, 20 years ago officers would have been lined up to get overtime. That's not the case anymore. People want to have their own, a better work/life balance I think is the way people would put it. So we're probably going to need to have more officers in general over time, just to be able to fill all the needs in the city. So there are a couple of things we need to do there. One is pay. We know starting pay is out a line. So we increased it by six and a half, 6.4% this year, but that's not enough. Additionally, we're going to have to overall look at police pages to make sure we can retain officers. Somewhere around 50% of the officers who we train here in Nashville come from out of state. And so, to a great degree, they're going to be much more responsive to pay than that might have been the case in the past.

[00:19:45] And then the final thing I guess I would say about it is that we're still struggling to recruit enough of a diverse workforce. We started a collegiate training academy, essentially a class where police, where college students can learn about policing at TSU. We hope we hope that will help. But we're also going to need to do a better job of recruiting Spanish-speaking and Kurdish officers here in Nashville to reflect the diversity of the community.

WILKINS You've been listening to Mayor David Briley. We're having in-depth conversations with Briley and Councilman John Cooper, the finalists in the contest for Nashville mayor. After a break, we'll ask both candidates about two of the most pressing challenges for Nashville: transportation and housing. You're listening to Decision Time, an hourlong special on the runoff for Nashville mayor. I'm Jason Moon Wilkins. This is 90.3 WPLN.

VOTER #3 I think the city is letting the developers run the growth as opposed to the city managing the growth.

VOTER #4 We seem to be having a huge gap between the haves and have-nots in town.

VOTER #5 You know, I know that the city wants to grow and needs to grow, and that's not a bad thing. I just would like to see it in a more controlled way and not giving up so much.

[00:21:06] **WILKINS** The voices of Nashville voters. Early voting is still under way, and the next mayor will be chosen on Sept. 12. You're listening to Decision Time, a special hourlong conversation with incumbent Mayor David Riley and Metro Councilman John Cooper. I'm Jason Moon Wilkins. This is 90.3 WPLN.

We're going to turn to affordable housing, where Briley and Cooper have been at odds about the next steps for Nashville. We're going to run their plans past our own tough critic, WPLN's growth and development reporter, Meribah Knight. Hi, Meribah.

MERIBAH KNIGHT Hey, Jason. I've been known to be tough.

WILKINS Well let's get to that, then. So, can you explain how rising rents have become such a big campaign issue?

KNIGHT Well for one, Nashville's seen a surge in housing costs, and then a year ago, the city released a report that claimed we're on track to have a shortage of 31,000 affordable units by 2025. And that's a really jarring number.

WILKINS So what has the city done in response to that?

KNIGHT Well, there's various efforts going on around the city around affordable housing. But the biggest change is that a couple of months ago, Mayor David Briley rolled out a plan called Under One Roof, and basically, it commits \$500 million over the next decade to build affordable housing. And now much of that money is going to the housing authority to help them redevelop aging public housing, shifting it from very low-income to a mixture of low-income and more higher-income renters. There's also some money to help developers build small apartment complexes in neighborhoods. That's the Barnes Housing Trust Fund, and it's meant increased density while keeping the units affordable.

WILKINS So Briley probably wants to score some political points for taking this step, but that isn't exactly how this is gone.

KNIGHT No, that is not. Councilman Cooper has slammed almost every aspect of this plan. He's sort of proclaimed himself a watchdog over MDHA, the city's housing authority. And he says Under One Roof is essentially giving them a bailout.

WILKINS Reporter Tony Gonzalez, he starts with David Briley and his plan, which to this point is a one-page bullet list of ideas.

GONZALEZ The Under One Roof affordable housing plan has been criticized for being a bit thin on paper compared to some other policies. Do you think that's fair?

BRILEY Well, the Under One Roof plan that I proposed a few weeks ago is the city's biggest single investment in affordable housing ever. Is it a complete and total assessment and every step that we will need to take? No it's not. But these are clear steps that are easily taken and will result in more affordable housing, better neighborhoods in our community. If you look at Under One Roof, it looks at investments with him MDHA to make serious changes to the quality of life, the amount of affordable and workforce, and market-rate housing in these six neighborhoods that have struggled for many decades. I think that's critically important for the city to understand that it's not just about housing, it's about the quality of life in these neighborhoods. We're gonna make a significant change. When it comes to the second part, the investments in the Barnes Fund, I think we found that those are generally successful. They don't deal with every single kind of housing we need, but the housing that's being built with the Barnes Fund is really important for us to construct. And then the third part is that we do need a

lot more private investment to see the kind of affordable housing we need to have built in this community, and whether that's banks or philanthropies or individuals or businesses that are making those investments, we're working to try and pull that together. Now my opponent on this particular issue, he had one important vote early on in the council to make in this regard: inclusionary zoning, which would have required developers to build affordable housing with their projects. He's the only council member who voted against it.

GONZALEZ I want to come back to you on your Under One Roof plan just for a moment.

BRILEY Sure.

GONZALEZ You know when we look at it, it doesn't appear to be legally binding or that all of that funding is guaranteed. So why should people have confidence in the next steps?

BRILEY Well, one of the things that the community has really pressed for is some sort of dedicated revenue source for affordable housing. Under Tennessee law, it's just very difficult to create that. The closest you can get in the city of Nashville right now is the issuance of debt. Because every time you issue debt, you are contractually obligated for 20 years to pay it off. That's one of the reasons why we made the most significant investment in the MDHA component of Under One Roof: because every time we make those investments, it is actually a 20-year commitment to doing it.

WILKINS David Briley, defending his affordable housing plans. Meribah Knight, what stands out to you in what we just heard?

KNIGHT The thing that Briley said that I found really interesting is his explanation of maneuvering around state law to create a pipeline of affordable housing, essentially a guarantee that it will be built. As the law stands, it's really hard to do that, he said, except for when the city floats bonds on MDHA's behalf. Briley said that the debt creates a sort of 20-year repayment timeline. It's kind of like a contract that forces the agency to deliver on its promises. So that is more binding than critics have been saying.

WILKINS One of those leading critics is his opponent, Councilman John Cooper, who's blasted Briley's plans throughout the campaign. But reporter Tony Gonzalez pressed him to provide details on his own plans to increase affordable housing in Nashville.

GONZALEZ Councilman, you've asked voters to trust your real estate background, but we don't see particularly specific numbers for the number of new affordable units you would promise or particularly urgent timeline to get those built. Can you explain why you're not setting clear targets?

COOPER Well, there is an urgent timeline and an urgency. Now, the ability to guarantee a particular number of units really is beyond what is appropriate for

somebody running for mayor to do. Because a lot of that depends on market, who who's available to build stuff, right? I mean if you look at private-sector projects right now, many of them are stretched out because of just the overall demand and the 2% unemployment economy, in terms of getting stuff done. Now in terms of specific promises, look at my policy platform book. We need a separate department to be doing this, separate from MDHA, which is really administering and now taking subsidies from the city for what were public housing sites. They know everything they're doing is very worthy, but affordable housing should not just be limited to those historic sites in Nashville. It has to have a bigger role and to have a separate affordable housing department that's not part of the mayor's office, that's not staffed by political appointees, but has in effect some civil service expertise, because housing is complicated. Our biggest tool and affordable housing frankly comes from the state. It's 9% low-income housing tax credits. They're as good as gold. We need more of them. We need all that we can get, and we need to deploy them efficiently. And you've got to make it central to everything that goes on in the city. Every time there's an incentive or there's use of discretionary Metro money, you have to also ask the question, "What are we getting for it in terms of affordable housing?" At the fairgrounds, famously, there's a large incentive, and the mayor's office, the government didn't put affordable housing into it. A private group primarily of labor unions got it negotiated.

GONZALEZ On the specificity of the numbers, I mean, at the same time you've cited this study that we're 31,000 units short. So how would we know —

COOPER Well I've cited —

GONZALEZ — what progress we're making?

COOPER Well, exactly. You've gotta benchmark it. And that's why you need an independent non-mayor's office to do the benchmarking. The 31,000 has been a longtime study. I think it was really conducted in Mayor Barry's administration. Is it still 31,000? I don't know, but we know it's a lot. And we know that strategically, you have to have a city where our children can afford to live here. What's the point of the city if our children can't live here? It's a big challenge, but we're not unique. Every successful super-regional city like ourselves is feeling this crisis as well. Everyone is working through its own improvements, its own suggestions. Part of our future is learning from these other cities. We don't do a very good job of best practices from peer cities. I asked the Amazon folks who's doing a good job. They have deep insight to more than 200 cities. The cities they cited would surprise you, in terms of their view of in fact who's doing a good job and why are they doing a good job. And these are just these basic lessons that we need to learn.

GONZALEZ Let me ask you one other follow up on this.

COOPER Sure.

GONZALEZ And you mentioned the private sector actually being a little strapped on resources or stretched.

COOPER Well, labor, and you mean we're good at bringing in labor from really far away just to do basic construction projects here.

GONZALEZ But let me ask: you have also, part of your criticism of the mayor's plan is that it involves private funding. But some of your ideas also depend on the private sector, which is not exactly something the mayor can control. So why should people trust some of these ideas?

COOPER My criticism in the mayor's plan, and frankly, he's corrected it in the course of the campaign. You know, the last couple times up, he said, "Well it's a \$500 million plan." They used to say a \$750 million plan because in effect they're tacitly admitting that 250 million of it was always made up. It was a request for funding, so of the \$500 million that is now —

GONZALEZ I do want to focus on your plan, though, because your plan does suggest that we could ask the private sector or nonprofits to kick in money as well.

COOPER Well, we have a very small revolving fund which is a little bit different than what this is contemplated, and both Microsoft and Google have been pioneering these revolving funds in their home communities. The revolving fund is based on time to market for particularly nonprofit affordable housing developers. So much of their uncertainty and work is really in the early stage of the project until they get what's known as permanent financing. And if you can facilitate a project up to its permanent financing, then that money comes back to the revolving fund. You can redeploy it again. It's very different than just putting in a \$250 million request for people to show up here and do affordable housing, which we of course hope they do. But can you count it? Can the citizens count on it being here? When a government talks to its citizens, it needs to do it with more certainty than that.

WILKINS We've just heard from Metro Councilman John Cooper and Mayor David Briley on their plans to keep Nashville an affordable place to live.

You're listening to Decision Time, an hourlong special from WPLN on the runoff for Nashville Mayor. WPLN's growth and development reporter Meribah Knight has been watching this issue of affordable housing closely. What did you hear of substance or maybe potential holes from the candidates?

KNIGHT Yeah. Well, Mayor Briley's plan depends on some \$250 million of private funding going into building more affordable housing. And Cooper has criticized him mightily for this. You heard him saying it's made up money earlier on. But Cooper's plan also calls on help from the private sector. He wants companies with large numbers of employees in town to take on the housing crisis, like Google's done in the Bay Area recently. They just pledged a billion dollars to build 25,000 units. The other thing that stands out is Briley's plan is really about reimagining public housing complexes. He

wants to build on the current plan to overhaul these neighborhoods, making them even more dense while also bringing in more affluent tenants. Cooper, on the other hand, is really drawing a line between truly low-income housing and what's affordable housing. He seems to want to look beyond just rethinking public housing.

WILKINS Well, and John Cooper also brought up something I hadn't heard him mentioned before: this idea of a new separate affordable housing agency.

KNIGHT Yeah, that is something that's really recent that he's brought up in the campaign. And one question I have about that is Cooper talks about wanting to avoid bureaucracy, but this would create a third arm for affordable housing, beyond the mayor's office and MDHA, which is already a quasi-public agency. And as it stands, they already really struggle to talk to each other. So this would just throw something else in the mix. It's something I really would need to learn about.

WILKINS Thank you, Meribah.

KNIGHT Thanks, Jason.

[00:33:57] **WILKINS** Let's move on to a topic that is top of mind for voters but has been tough politically: transportation.

The city's coming off a decisive defeat of a transit referendum that would have raised taxes and dedicated the money to upgrading mass transit options, including building light rail, and then WeGo, the city's transit agency, saw a budget reduction. So Tony Gonzalez, what are the candidates' plan to do given voters don't seem to have the appetite for big spending right now?

GONZALEZ Yeah, well the candidates are well aware of that transit referendum defeat, and neither candidate has a comprehensive plan that looks anything like the transit referendum in terms of the scale, the ambition, the cost. Really, they're each talking about kind of bullet lists of what they'd like to do in the short term. That has led to some tough questions about how serious they are about transit, how urgent they're feeling about transportation improvements. We're going to start with David Briley. In his case, he doesn't even list transit or transportation on his policy platforms on his website. So we wanted to ask him about this.

GONZALEZ Residents say they're not seeing many promising transportation ideas from your office. You allowed WeGo's budget to be cut. You've mostly been talking about a project along one area: Dickerson Road. Are you interested in creating a city-wide transportation plan?

BRILEY Well, I do think that the when you look at the city of Nashville and talk to folks about the negative consequences of growth, the No. 1 Issue that you hear is folks feeling like they spend more time in their cars than they ever did before. And I appreciate that; I share that same sense. Now, my opponent and I agree about exactly

what the next steps need to be. He thinks we need to go do some sort of comprehensive plan about exactly what's going to happen over the next decade or two. I think we need to go and get to work and build some things, and so there are four things we're already working on out of the mayor's office. First, you mentioned the Dickerson Road corridor, getting a second regional transit line in place because frankly our transit and transportation issues are regional; they're not local. They're not just Nashville issues.

The second thing is that we do need to look at some sort of transit line between the airport and downtown. Most cities starting out their transit network see that as an early win. And I'm focused on getting the convention center authority and the airport authority working on that. The third thing that we need to do is to improve the quality of the WeGo transit system. And we did see a bit of a pullback in terms of service this year, but MTA right now is in the process of doing what they're calling a better bus survey to look at how we can expand the system in the coming years to make it more user-friendly, more convenient for folks, not just with frequency and duration but also adding more neighborhood transit hubs which we're starting to do: on Clarksville Pike, on Hillsboro, out in Madison, and we're looking at other locations to do that. The fourth thing and what is probably the most critical immediately is to work better with TDOT to use our existing infrastructure more effectively, by getting better communications technology into these corridors in and out of town, and TDOT is working with us to come up with the resources to do that. Those are the kinds of things we need to get to work on because I think before we have another transit referendum, we need to get some stuff in place. People need to see how it works, it needs to be built on time on budget, and then I think folks will be willing to vote for a dedicated revenue source to fund transit going forward.

GONZALEZ You mention on time and on budget. I don't have a clear sense of the when or the delivery of the when on some of these budgets.

BRILEY Sure.

GONZALEZ What would you say to somebody who doesn't feel a particular urgency right now from the administration?

BRILEY Sure. Well, next year's budget will include the resources necessary to expand the WeGo transit system consistent with the results of the better bus study that they're currently doing. This fall, we'll be talking with the airport authority and convention center authority about how to take the next steps in terms of that process, and we've already made quite a fair amount of progress in terms of the Dickerson Road corridor, in terms of the land-use planning that has to take place first, and we're working with TDOT about the engineering part of it, which will which will happen next. All of that is moving pretty quickly although behind the scenes.

WILKINS That's David Briley, explaining his transportation priorities to Tony Gonzalez as part of our exclusive hour with both candidates for mayor of Nashville. We turn now to John Cooper and ask him to defend his transportation promises.

GONZALEZ So, Councilman, you've said the city needs to spend more money on its bus system, and you've promised a new transportation plan in the first year, but can you explain: is your plan the kind of plan that would go in front of voters for approval, and if so, when would that happen?

COOPER Well, I am committed to having a really powerful independent expert coming to Nashville and devising a plan to pick the low-hanging fruit to do that next year. We have all these studies while they're still fresh. We need to go ahead and have a plan. A lot of it is frankly Public Works oriented, right, and justice done with the council and the mayor. So that is intersections and turning lanes, right? And that is working with MTA in terms of a better bus system and bus stops that are appropriate, that have sidewalks where you can get there, right, and all of these kind of crazy things that you go around in Nashville going, "We've made it hard for the bus system to work." Right now in time, there'll be another phase to this, and I would of course expect there to be a plan a year. That's what a great city does, is you're never without a plan ahead. And you build the public trust by what you have accomplished, and you roll it out to almost all the districts, and you use time to work and time to school and you don't, it's not anti-car. You're accepting that most of us still have to use cars to get to work. And so you don't say, "We're not going to help any of those people." Now some of this is state-oriented. Time and time again, everybody's favorite solution is express lanes. And for me, a favorite solution ends up being actual smart cadres like in Atlanta where you have traffic lights: knowing how many cars are there and where the bus is, and to get it turned with the most efficiency to help the most passengers in the throughput analysis.

GONZALEZ So just to make sure I pin you down on this —

COOPER Yeah.

GONZALEZ — you know you're not contemplating a plan that's so ambitious that it would require more dedicated tax money or funding that would go in front of the voters.

COOPER Well I —

GONZALEZ This is somewhat less ambitious or more piecemeal than that?

COOPER My plan is not going to be a \$9 billion plan, but it's gonna be many hundred million dollars, right, up next year. And then I think it's a question of looking carefully at the finances, of figuring out how we in effect pay the interest rate on the bonds that's going gonna be floated to do that plan. Now, happily, interest rates are really going down these days. Right? So the overall program costs would make this appear to be a good move to go ahead and get done. Then, it's the question of our ability to execute on the plan. Now that comes into a deeper question about Metro, which is: why are we so bad at RFQs and RFPs and using contractors working for Metro to do the work efficiently? For example, in southeast Nashville, there are four separate sidewalk projects. Everything is ready to go, but due to mess-ups on procurement, all these

separate projects are stalled and have been stalled for some period of time. It's the efficiency of government being able to deploy the money — that's a huge deal — and then picking the right choices.

WILKINS We've heard the candidates for mayor of Nashville on one of the most important issues to voters: traffic. Tony, you've covered transit. What stands out to you from these interviews?

GONZALEZ Yeah, well starting with John Cooper, I think we learned in pressing him that he's really thinking about issuing bonds to cover his transportation plans. So not a tax referendum before voters, but a bond issuance. And he says that it would cost, in his words, hundreds of millions of dollars to do the kinds of transportation improvements that he wants. Mayor David Briley isn't going much further than Councilman Cooper. In fact, Briley said on one of the debate stages recently that he doesn't think the city needs a comprehensive plan. He has more of this punch list of smaller projects: on Dickerson Road, light rail to the airport, those sorts of things. He's saying we need to prove ourselves in some little pockets of the city before we even think about going back to voters with a bigger plan. So both candidates seem leery of a large plan or getting pushback on that sort of thing. They want some short-term wins on transportation to try to move the needle on how we get around town.

WILKINS After a break, we'll get the candidates on the record on some lingering issues. We'll ask them for their final thoughts on the role of the mayor and debrief with reporter Tony Gonzalez for insights from the conversations. This is Decision Time, an hour dedicated to unpacking issues one on one with David Briley and John Cooper. Stay with us here on 90.3 WPLN.

[00:43:47] **SWENSON** Hi, this is Steve Swenson, president and CEO of Nashville Public Radio. The special show you are listening to is an important piece of our public service mission. We want to be an island of civility in a world that has become polemic and full of name calling. Tonight's show is part of what we do best at WPLN: quality, serious, civil discourse on issues important to our community. As a local civic news organization, we can only do that with your help. Please make a donation on behalf of local independent journalism at wpln.org/give.

VOTER #6 We are the taxpayers, we're the ones that spend this money. We need it for us, for bridges, for teachers, for firemen.

VOTER #7 It's very expensive. It's becoming only more expensive to live in Davidson County.

VOTER #8 I'm hoping for a more people-oriented government, people who really care about the low income, elderly, handicapped people.

WILKINS You're listening to Decision Time, an hourlong special from WPLN with the two finalists in the race for Nashville mayor: incumbent mayor David Briley and Councilman John Cooper. This is 90.3 WPLN. I'm Jason Moon Wilkins.

Reporter Tony Gonzalez sat down with both David Briley and John Cooper, asking them some quick-hit questions on key Metro issues. Cooper answers first.

GONZALEZ Do you anticipate raising the property tax to fund Metro and your various campaign promises?

COOPER No, I do not. There are more revenues available to the city than just the property tax. So right now there's a \$60 million surplus in the Music City Center. When we established that building, we really worried that it would fail. So we were overly cautious in providing additional revenue sources for it. Well, you've got to do something about that. At the time, and I've talked to several of the people who helped get this marvelous thing organized back 10 years ago, they all said the same thing. If you'd brought this fact up in the room at the time, they all would have said, "That's a great problem to have. I'm sure you'll solve that problem when you get to it." Well we have gotten to it now, and it's not going to be fair to raise property taxes out into the public when you have this kind of math going on.

BRILEY What I've said consistently about the property tax is that it shouldn't be the first thing that any mayor tries to do, and I've been able to balance the city's budget and move us forward without a property tax increase. But I know that in certain instances, we've got work to do to get our employees' wages caught up. Teachers, police in particular, investments in our neighborhoods. If we can't do everything we need, it's the mayor's obligation to go to the public and ask for a property tax increase.

[00:46:42] **WILKINS** And Tony, you also asked whether both candidates would keep the city's police chief and school superintendent in place.

GONZALEZ Right. So both candidates are supportive of the police chief. That comes after a couple of rocky years. You know, there've been fatal police shootings. A referendum was passed to create the first civilian oversight board of the police. But their support remains with the chief, at least for now. As far as Metro schools, you know, they had their own controversy and replacement of the superintendent who was ousted by the Board of Education. The interim chief is heartily supported by Mayor Briley and has support from Cooper, who says he wants her to succeed.

COOPER Well I will work as hard as I can to make that superintendent a success. All right. We need for Director Battle to be a success. She is our director right now. So let's go. You're going to do the same thing in all cases to make that person a success.

BRILEY As I've said before, I hope that Dr. Adrian Battle is a director of schools in 20 years because if she is, then the district will have made great strides, success.

GONZALEZ Bottom line is that in this venue, asked questions by us, they've stood by what they've been saying for months on these leadership decisions.

WILKINS One of the divides between the candidates in recent weeks has been a fundamental one. They have different views of the role of Nashville's mayor. So we asked each of them to share what he sees as the essential duties.

GONZALEZ How do you see the makeup of the mayor role in terms of hands-on management versus taking maybe a symbolic stance for the city?

BRILEY Let me put it this way. I think primarily, the job of the mayor is to make sure that people are taken care of, that we're doing everything we can in our city to provide an opportunity to be successful, reach your fullest potential, be prosperous in the city of Nashville. And if you're going to do that, you have to focus on people. And when it comes to immigration in particular, the current immigration situation in our country is a clear obstacle to those things to success and prosperity and reaching your fullest potential. Now, the mayor can't legislate on immigration, but the mayor and mayors across the country coming together can change the dialogue, change the direction of the country generally when it comes to those issues. And so frankly, all the work that I could do on public education to get it funded, to have better teachers and more resources for students, will be lost if parents of immigrant kids are afraid to go to school with them. And so it's not "either/or," it's "both and." The mayor has to focus both on those brass tax issues like teacher funding but also focus on the national dialogue, the national discourse on immigration, and try and get it changed so that we can make progress nationally, so that we can see progress locally.

GONZALEZ What do you see as the role of the mayor, in terms of nuts and bolts administration versus taking on more symbolic stances?

COOPER Well the symbolic stances are super great and important. But only the mayor can make capital allocation decisions, like the CEO of a company. Right? That's, only the mayor can do that. And the mayor has to do a good job of doing that. And that's why I increasingly come back and remind people that it's a very administrative job, right? It's unlike a lot of things that people kind of wish that it were. It's very administrative. You got basically 22,000 employees. You've got 25 million square feet of schools, all of which have roofs and air conditioning systems. You've got 1900 miles of roads with no sidewalk on them. You've got an aging and decaying water system, right? All of these things are a management challenge. It's not about Republicans and Democrats; it's about dollars and cents.

[00:50:58] **WILKINS** Let's step back for a moment and do some analysis. Tony Gonzalez, when you look at the tenor of this campaign, you know, how is it changed now that we're in the runoff?

GONZALEZ So once we went down for multiple candidates down to two, I think the stark differences have been more clear than before. So what I'm seeing from Mayor David Briley is more of this optimistic stance.

BRILEY I think that our city has always been an optimistic place that found a way to build a stronger, more caring community over time. It meant that we have found a way to invest in each other over the last 20 years or so and build a stronger place to live. I want to continue us moving in that general direction.

GONZALEZ John Cooper is much more comfortable being a little more pessimistic, or at least critical of some of the city's decisions, some of the conditions that he sees around Nashville

COOPER For too long, a lot of people are feeling left out of this great new city.

GONZALEZ Then there's also been this injection of partisanship here in these final weeks, largely being pushed by Mayor Briley. He is pushing his progressive track record. That's the word he uses, although he has thrown around the word Democratic, or he has in fact one time called Councilman Cooper a Republican conservative, which the councilman pushes back against.

COOPER This business that I'm not a Democrat, you know, when I've spent my life in Democratic politics. Back in 1980 I managed Jane Eskind's campaign for public service commissioner when she was the first woman elected statewide. I mean, on and on. And so, in this year to say I'm not a Democrat is kind of, just, crazy, and I guess I would like the record corrected on that because I've got a lifetime of pride and effort behind that.

GONZALEZ I think it's a little bit more of a parallel to national politics right now: questions about where the country or the city are headed, uncertainty about the future and the economy. Those sorts of overtones are now here in Nashville's campaign.

WILKINS So Tony, you ask them about topics where maybe they haven't been totally consistent in their talking points.

GONZALEZ Yeah. You know, we've been trying to keep track of whether they've shifted during the campaign, or if they're making promises that differ from what they've done in public office before. So I want to talk about David Briley and policing because he's been getting criticism from both the Fraternal Order of Police and some of these reform-minded advocates. For example, community oversight. He was not totally on board with the referendum to create the community oversight board. Now he is saying that he is, you know, really a staunch supporter of community oversight. I think that's a little bit of a change.

Councilman Cooper has not faced frankly as many questions about policing. It's just not the nature of his council position. It's worth noting that he also opposed community

oversight; as a council member he voted against the idea. Eventually it was passed by voters.

One other change we've definitely seen here lately during the campaign: we have seen David Briley warm to the idea of a property tax increase. He's not saying he would definitely make that change, but he has created a scenario where he might be willing to increase the property tax. In contrast, John Cooper has doubled down against the idea of raising taxes.

WILKINS Well, in a central part of Cooper's campaign and the tension between the two candidates is this idea of downtown versus everyone else, all the other neighborhoods. Cooper has tapped into this angst across the city that maybe downtown is getting all the attention and all the money. But it's not filtering out in benefiting the lives of other Nashvillians. But there are some nuances to this whole idea. Can you get into that?

GONZALEZ Right. This is a central part of the campaign. We hear it from voters. We hear questions about this. What's going on with downtown versus the neighborhoods? I think what we're seeing, especially here lately in the runoff, is David Briley attacking John Cooper's facts and his perspective on this. John Cooper says the downtown is not generating enough revenue or prosperity for everyone. David Briley points out that downtown does generate the most property taxes by far and that that money does get spent out in the neighborhoods. So the new libraries, the new parks, the new community centers, they're not being built downtown, they're being built out in the neighborhoods, at least in recent years. Of course, downtown does get a lot of attention. There's a lot of private investment: the new skyscrapers, the biggest civic events, the tourism, the bachelorettes, all of that draw a lot of attention to downtown. So I think this is the question that voters need to parse out: is it attention going to downtown or resources? And this is where the candidates disagree, and whoever becomes mayor, there is still going to be wrestling with downtown prosperity and getting prosperity out into the neighborhoods.

WILKINS Well Tony, thank you for taking the time and getting into some of these topics. We know Nashvillians, they want to know about as they head to the polls.

GONZALEZ Yeah, thanks Jason. These are critical issues. And we also thank the candidates for giving us their time.

[00:56:14] **WILKINS** You've been listening to Decision Time, an hourlong special on Nashville's mayoral runoff election on WPLN. If you just caught the end of this and want to hear the whole thing, you can find it at wpln.org as well as our other extensive coverage of the mayor's race.

The show took a major effort from everyone at National Public Radio. Thank you to reporters Tony Gonzalez, Meribah Knight, Blake Farmer and Samantha Max. The show was edited by Chas Sisk, Emily Siner and Anita Bugg. And thanks as well to Scott

Smith, Cameron Atkins, Elle Turner and Nashville Public Radio's CEO, Steve Swenson.
I'm Jason Moon Wilkins. Thanks for listening.