

JAMES BRIGGS | Opinion

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Briggs: Westfield is Indiana's boom town. It needs to grow up.



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Westfield needs to find some adults to take charge.

IndyStar's Brittany Carloni captured a scene from the city's desperate need for grownup supervision earlier this year. During a February meeting, Troy Patton of the Westfield City Council and Mayor Andy Cook engaged in a sharp exchange over the state of local government. Patton, as Carloni writes, referred to "dysfunction" gripping the town, prompting Cook to ask whom Patton was referring to.

"Your administration is dysfunctional. We're dysfunctional," Patton replied.

That's what the 2023 elections are going to be about: finding government officials who can work together and plan for the future, preferably without devolving into litigation as has happened between Cook and Clerk-Treasurer Cindy Gossard.

Cook, who is serving his fourth term as mayor, has told people he will not seek a fifth term. (He did not reply to an email from me seeking comment.) Two Republican council members, Jake Gilbert and Scott Willis, have launched bids to succeed Cook. Both are pitching themselves as calming agents who can lead Westfield into a new era that is already well underway, even if local government hasn't quite caught up.

"As a Marine of 30 years, I don't do drama. I just don't do drama," Willis told me last week as he formally announced his candidacy for mayor. "As I sit in these council meetings and listen to the bickering, it's disheartening quite frankly. It's embarrassing. We have a reputation in Westfield of being dysfunctional. That doesn't serve our residents at all."

Westfield is the fastest-growing city in Indiana. The population increased 7.7% last year, by more than 3,600 residents, both of which are the highest numbers in the state, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The next-closest city was Fort Wayne, which added about 1,800 people.

But Westfield's growth has been visibly haphazard and confusing even to developers that want to build things. Gilbert and Willis both say they would dust off the city's 2006

comprehensive plan, which predates the Great Recession and much of Westfield's boom period, and bring some professionalism to local government while figuring out a clearer path forward.

"We just need a refresh on the overall plan," Gilbert said. "There is confusion among people who want to invest in Westfield. Some blame the mayor. One thing for sure is there's not clarity on what we really even want. In a community that has grown this fast, that's a long time for the last update. I think there's an opportunity here for us to move forward and collaborate."

Gilbert and Willis are the first two entrants in a race that is likely to generate more contenders (mostly, if not all, Republicans who will compete in a primary) for this once-in-a-generation opportunity. They sound much the same when speaking in broad terms.

"Right now, our greatest need is strictly strong leadership that brings people together," Gilbert said. "That's what I do best. We can have all kinds of great plans, the best plans in the world, but you can't execute if you can't lead."

On that point they agree. But they differ on key questions about where to take Westfield.

Perhaps the most important matter facing the city is the mayor's effort to sell Grand Park, the 400-acre sports campus, with dozens of soccer and baseball fields, which plays host to Indianapolis Colts training camp.

Westfield has received seven bids from prospective buyers but has yet to release details. The potential sale has been a confusing, winding process, and there are a lot of questions about what it would mean for the city to give up full control of the property.

"I think that was the mayor's plan all along, to build it and sell it," Willis said. "I love Grand Park. I'm open minded to the process. I get asked all the time, 'Would you sell it?' and the answer is, I don't know. Until I understand the offers and what it means to the community, anyone saying we should sell or buy or hold, it's premature. All the facts aren't on the table."

Gilbert has a clearer answer: "For the life of me, I can't understand why we would sell it," he said.

Gilbert argues Westfield invested in one of the nation's most unique and massive sports complexes at just the right moment. It is becoming profitable at a time when other cities would struggle to replicate it because of soaring costs for land and construction. Gilbert concedes that unloading the debt would help the city, but thinks maintaining control of the asset is more important.

There are other differences, as well. Willis is more welcoming to growth and housing

could lock the city's gate behind them once they move in.

"Nationally, there are huge demographic shifts toward urban areas," Willis said. "The position I've taken is let's lean into that, accept it, let's do it right."

Gilbert and Willis each have compelling personal narratives. Willis is a U.S. Marine who retired earlier this year after about 30 years of service. Gilbert is the Westfield High School football coach, which makes him one of the top celebrities in a community that has evolved from a small town in Indianapolis's shadow to a city with a large school competing for state championships.

Gilbert's status could be a double-edged sword. It's hard to find anyone more popular than a winning football coach. But voters who support Gilbert for mayor have to consider whether they want to end the era of Gilbert as head coach. I asked Gilbert whether he could do both.

"That's a good question. That's the million-dollar question. I get it every day," Gilbert said. "If they allow me, I would love to stay on as a volunteer and my role would change. I would continue on as a coach, but not have to do all the administrative parts."

"It's really hard on a personal level because I love coaching. I think if I stay involved and pass the baton to the right guy, that's what matters most to me. Who is leading after I'm gone? We can get someone who will take us to a whole other level possibly."

Cook, the current Westfield mayor, has been publicly silent on his own matters of baton passing. Gilbert and Willis are the first two candidates running to grab it from him. Expect more candidates to emerge in a mayoral race that will be all about leading Westfield out of dysfunction.

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