



Courtesy of Randall Woodfin.

When he was elected in 2017, Randall L. Woodfin became the youngest mayor to take office in Birmingham in 120 years. Now 40 and nearly a year into his second term, Woodfin has made revitalization of the city's 99 neighborhoods his top priority, along with enhancing education, fostering a climate of economic opportunity, and leveraging public-private partnerships.

In a city battered by population and manufacturing loss, including iron and steel industries that once thrived there, Woodfin has looked to education and youth as the keys to a better future. He established Birmingham Promise, a public-private partnership that provides apprenticeships and tuition assistance to cover college costs for Birmingham high school graduates, and launched Pardons for Progress, which removed a barrier to employment opportunities through the mayoral pardon of 15,000 misdemeanor marijuana possession charges dating to 1990.

Woodfin is a graduate of Morehouse College and Samford University's Cumberland School of Law. He was an assistant city attorney for eight years before running for mayor, and served as president of the Birmingham Board of Education.

Generating Change in Birmingham

This interview, which has been edited for length, is also available as a *Land Matters* podcast: www.lincolnst.edu/publications/podcasts-videos.

ANTHONY FLINT: *How do you think your vision for urban revitalization played into the large number of first-time voters who've turned out for you?*

RANDALL WOODFIN: I think my vision for urban revitalization—which, on the ground, I call neighborhood revitalization—played a significant role in not just the usual voters coming out to the polls to support me, but new voters as well. I think they chose me because I listen to them more than I talk. I think many residents have felt, “Listen, I’ve had these problems next to my home, to the right or to the left of me, for years, and they’ve been ignored. My calls have gone unanswered. Services have not been rendered. I want a change.” I made neighborhood revitalization a priority because that’s the priority of the citizens I wanted to serve.

AF: *With the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act and the American Rescue Plan Act bringing unparalleled amounts of funding to state and local governments, what are your plans to distribute that money efficiently and get the greatest leverage?*

RW: This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to really supercharge infrastructure upgrades and investments we need to make in our city and community. This type of money probably hasn't been on the ground since the New Deal. When you think about that, there's an opportunity for the city of Birmingham citizens and communities to win.



With a population just over 200,000 people, Birmingham is the second-largest city in Alabama. Credit: Sean Pavone via iStock/Getty Images Plus.

We set up a unified command system to receive these funds. In one hand, in my left hand, the city of Birmingham is an entitlement city and we'll receive direct funds. In my right hand, we have to be aggressive and go after competitive grants for shovel-ready projects.

With our Stimulus Command Center, what we have done is partner not only with our city council, but we've partnered with our transportation agency. We have an inland port, so we partner with Birmingham Port. We partner with our airport as well as our water works department. All of these agencies are public agencies who happen to serve the same citizens I'm responsible for serving.

For us to approach all these infrastructure resources through a collective approach, that's the best way. We have an opportunity with this funding to supercharge not only our economic identity, but also to make real investments in our infrastructure that our citizens use every day.

AF: *The Lincoln Institute has done a lot of work aimed at equitable regeneration in legacy cities. What in your view are the key elements of neighborhood revitalization and community investment that truly pay off?*

RW: This is how I explain everything that happens from a neighborhood revitalization standpoint. I'll first share the problem through story. The city of Birmingham is fortunate to be made up of 23 communities in 99 neighborhoods. When you dive deep into that, just consider going to a particular neighborhood in a particular block. You have a mother in a single-family household where she is the responsible breadwinner and owner.

She has a child or grandchild that stays with her. She walks out onto her front porch, she looks to her right, there is an abandoned, dilapidated house that's been there for years that needs to be torn down. She looks to her [left], there's an empty lot next to her. When she walks out to that sidewalk, she's afraid for her child or her grandchild to play or ride the bicycle on that sidewalk because it's not bikeable.

That street, when she pulls out from the driveway, hasn't been paved in years. The neighborhood park she wants to walk her child or grandchild down to hasn't had upgraded, adequate playground equipment in some time. She's ready to walk her child or grandchild home because it's getting dark, but the streetlights don't work. Then she's ready to feed her child or grandchild, but they live in a food desert. These are the things we are attempting to solve for.

One is blight removal, getting rid of that dilapidated structure to the right of her. We need to go vertical with more single-family homes that are affordable and market rate so [we don't have] "snaggletooth" neighborhoods where you remove blight, but now you have a house, empty lot, house, empty lot, empty lot.

That child, we have to invest in that sidewalk so they can play safely or just take a walk. We have to pave more streets. We have to have adequate playground equipment. We have to partner with our power company to get more LED lights in that neighborhood, so people feel safe. We have to invest in healthy food options so our citizens can have a better quality of life. These are the things related to neighborhood revitalization that I frame and address to make sure people want to live in these neighborhoods.

AF: *What are your top priorities in addressing climate change? How does Birmingham feel the impacts of warming, and what can be done about it?*

RW: Climate change is real. Let me be very clear in stating that climate change is real. We're not near the coast and so we don't feel the impact right away that other cities do, like Mobile would in the state of Alabama. However, when those certain weather things happen on the coast in Alabama, they do have an impact on the city of Birmingham.

We also have an issue of tornadoes where I believe they continue to increase over the years and they affect a city like Birmingham that sits in a bowl in the valley. Around air quality, Birmingham was a city founded from a blue-collar standpoint of iron and steel and other things made here. Although that's not

driving the economy anymore, there's still vestiges that have a negative impact.

We have a Superfund site right in the heart of our city that has affected people's air quality, which I think is totally unacceptable. Addressing climate change from a social justice standpoint has been a priority for the city of Birmingham and this administration. What we are doing is partnering with the EPA for our on-the-ground local issues.

From a national standpoint, Birmingham joined other cities as it relates to the Paris Deal. I think this conversation of climate change can't be in the isolation of a city and unfortunately, the city of Birmingham doesn't have home rule. Having the conversations with our governor about the importance of the state of Alabama actually championing and joining calls of, "We need to make more noise and be more intentional and aggressive about climate change" has been a struggle.

AF: *What about your efforts to create safe, affordable housing, including a land bank?*

RW: I look at it from the standpoint of a toolbox. Within this toolbox, you have various tools to address housing. At the height of the city of Birmingham's population, in the late '60s, early '70s, there was about 340,000 residents. We're down to 206,000 residents in our city limits.

You can imagine the cost and burden that's had on our housing stock. When you add on homes passing from one generation to the next and not necessarily being taken care of, we've had a considerable amount of blight. Like other cities across the nation, we created a land bank. This land bank was created prior to my administration, but what we've attempted to do as an administration is make our land bank more

We have to pave more streets. We have to have adequate playground equipment. We have to partner with our power company to get more LED lights in that neighborhood, so people feel safe. We have to invest in healthy food options so our citizens can have a better quality of life.



A family explores One Pratt Park shortly after its opening in 2019. Upgrading parks, playgrounds, and other local infrastructure is a key part of the neighborhood revitalization efforts underway in Birmingham. Credit: Andrew Yeager/WBHM.

efficient. Then driving that efficiency is not just looking toward those who can buy land in bulk, but also empowering the next-door neighbor, or the neighborhood, or the church that's on the ground within that neighborhood to be able to participate in purchasing the lot next door to make sure, again, that we can get rid of these snaggletooth blocks or snaggletooth neighborhoods, and go vertical with single-family homes.

Another thing we're doing is acknowledging that in urban cores, it's hard to get private developers at the table. What we've been doing [with some of our ARPA funds] is setting aside money to offset some of these developer costs to support not only affordable but market-rate housing within our city limits, to make sure our citizens have a seat at the table so they can feel empowered, if they choose to want to actually have a home, that there's a path for them.

AF: *Finally, tell us a little bit about your belief in guaranteed income, which has been offered to single mothers in a pilot program. You've joined several other mayors in this effort. How does that reflect your approach to governing this midsize postindustrial city?*

RW: The city of Birmingham is fortunate to be a part of a pilot program that offers guaranteed income for single-family mothers in our city. This income is \$375 over a 12-month period. That's \$375 a month, no strings attached, no requirements of what they can spend the money on.

Every city in this nation has its own story, has its own character, has its own set of unique challenges. At the same time, we all share similar fates and have similar issues. The city of Birmingham has its fair share of poverty. We don't just have poverty, we have concentrated poverty, [and] guaranteed income is another tool within that toolbox of reducing poverty. Birmingham has over 60 percent of households led by single women. That is not something I'm bragging about. That is a fundamental fact. A lot of these single-family mothers struggle.

I think we all would agree, no one can live off \$375 a month. If you had this \$375 additional funding in your pocket or your homes, would that help your household? Does that help keep food on the table? Does it help keep your utilities paid? Does it help keep clothing on your children's backs and shoes on their feet? Does it help you get from point A to B to keep your job to provide for your child?

This is why I believe this guaranteed income pilot program will be helpful. We only have 120 slots, so it's not necessarily the largest amount of people, but I can tell you over 7,000 households applied for this. The need is there for us to do every single thing we can to provide more opportunities for our families to be able to take care of their families. [□](#)

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