

Janessa Wilkins, City of Rockford: Part 1

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Rockford, people, residents, neighborhood, community, sustainability

Haley: Hello, my name is Haley Dahl and welcome to the *Green Exploration: Rockford* podcast. Today I will be meeting with Janessa Wilkins, the Seventh Ward alderman from the City of Rockford. We will be discussing Rockford's social and environmental issues from the lens of the Seventh Ward, an under-served ward on the northwest side of the City. ***Intro Music*** Without further ado, Janessa, the first thing, of course, you can introduce yourself, and I would like to know what motivated you to get involved in the environmental challenges in Rockford?

Janessa: All right, well, thank you for having me on, Miss Haley. Again, like she said, everyone, my name is Janessa Wilkins. And I decided to get more involved in Rockford as a whole, not just because of environmental reasons. Even though that is high priority on my list, there are multiple reasons why I decided to get more involved and run for Alderman in the city of Rockford. But in terms of the environment, I know we've always had issues with our numbers kind of being high in terms of bad air quality. And even with the water, there was an issue and I know we've, you know, kind of have some legal things that have happened due to it. But that is something that I've recently spoke with different city officials about, you know, like what sorts of things that we're doing differently now than, you know, what we were compared to maybe 10 years ago. And so Rockford is really making some strides in some areas and in other areas, you know, we can, you know, still use some work, but, you know, that's life, right? And nothing will ever be perfect. I don't anticipate that we'll ever be in like a utopia society. But just, you know, the environment as a whole, you know, it just we have to, we have to take care of it. And so, it's important to me to have City leaders that places our environment as high priority. And so the best way to make sure that was gonna happen was for me to run myself. So yeah, that was kind of the reasoning as to why I got involved. Like I said, it was, it was a slew of things that led me to that decision, but the environment definitely needs more attention. And I don't think we get that at a national level. And so the more awareness that I can bring at a local level, the better.

Haley: Exactly, exactly. That's why, that's why we're here today. So with that being said would you mind kind of familiarizing us more with the Seventh Ward because from my understanding, it is one of, if not the, most under-served community in Rockford?

Janessa: Yes. Yes, I mean, what would you like to know about the Ward?

Haley: Anything that you feel like could be relevant to what we're speaking on today. I honestly did some of my own research, I have been looking at some maps that people have created with GIS and from my, again, from my understanding, it seems like the Seventh Ward is predominantly Black, predominantly lower income based on the information that I have found online.

Janessa: Yes, well, and something that makes Ward Seven unique compared to the other 13 wards is I have kind of a high density of residential areas. And so whereas, you know, you might go somewhere out east or maybe even south in Rockford and you'll see a lot more like stores like retail stores or different agencies, companies, things like that. And like I said, my area, there are a lot of residents. Like, we literally only have probably about three restaurants where you can sit down and eat. And, you know, capacity is probably less than 20 in those spots. You know, it's like everyone's fighting for space, and then, you know, that my area has also been termed as, we're in a floodplain. And so that, that has detrimental effects to the area in terms of, you know, the City even wanting to do new developments, or even beyond the City, but even, you know, out of town investors, you know, they look at that area, and it's like, you know, what type of profit, or what type of good outcomes could they have, if they were to invest in there? And what would it really take in order for us to fix the issues in the area for those investments to be sound investments. And so, I do have to keep that in the back of my mind, when individuals will come to me or city planning comes up and, you know, I don't see a lot of action happening in the area, those are things that I have to keep in the back of my mind. Like, we're so far behind on where we need to be in that area that it's going to take a lot of work to just get to that point to where we can even sit down and look at a plan of action to just make some changes in the area that need to, in terms of in the environment. So I think that's just it's always been a struggle, and, you know, the fact that it has gone so long untreated. We're kind of getting to the point to where it's just like, you know, or are we going to let this area go now? Like, what's the plan here? You know, so, like I said, especially with the flooding, and all of that happens, you know, even federal dollars don't even get designated to those areas and can't be, because, you know, you've got to change so much with the structure. And it's like, okay, again, having a big residential area, and possibly having to raise those houses a couple of feet up just to be in compliance on what we would need to do to do some actual, you know, work in that area, in terms of economic development and things like that. It just, it would be mind boggling, like the amount of money that it would take to do that.

Haley: That's interesting that the federal government won't even send any money towards the area until it is compliant. Because wouldn't you think that, especially because you're talking about how much money it needs to take to become compliant, wouldn't you think the federal government would want to aid in that as well? Because if you don't have enough money to get things compliant, then why would nobody address that on the federal level. That doesn't, I guess, it just doesn't entirely, the logic to me just isn't there?

Janessa: Well, you know, and I think that same thing, but at the same time, you got to keep in mind that we have to be able to show that we'll be able to sustain the work that needs to be done. While I don't fully agree with the way things work with that, I do understand that, you

know, like anyone, if they're going to put money into it and invest money into something, they want to know that it's gonna continue on after that money stops. If we can't get it to a point to where it's just up to par for them to send them the money, then how are we going to do it after they send us the money and we get it done? And, you know, something else happens?

Haley: Yeah.

Janessa: So yeah, this is the type of stuff that keeps me up at night. Like how do you do it? But, you know, it's been, it's definitely been challenging thus far. And, you know, I've only been in this role for a couple of months now, officially. But what I can say is the amount of volunteering and the amount of help that has come my way has been overwhelmingly good and I've let all of the residents know, anyone that I've talked to, that we're going to, we're in this on our own, like right now we really are. Because if you look at the City's Master Plan, which is like a 25 year plan that talks about everything, you know, in terms of the City from development to the residents to the infrastructure, environment, everything, you know, it's there, their focus right now was on the downtown area, I had to tell everyone, you know, we've really got to, really get, to get used to applying for grants. And, you know, even sometimes with grants, you know, those are restricted funds. And so, with grants, and also with private funders, it can be done. We're not, we are not in an impossible situation.

Haley: No.

Janessa: We're in a difficult situation, but it can be done, but it's going to have to start with us. And so, and I'm not upset about that, because, you know, once we start working together and we show ourselves that we can do this, and once we start doing it, we're going to show that we can continue the work. And once again, like I said, once we show that we can continue on, you know, the investment in our neighborhood, that's when others will start to invest in us, we will start to get more federal funding, things like that, which will, as a whole, improve Rockford because you're only as strong as your your weakest link.

Haley: Yes.

Janessa: And it's no secret, like you said, Seven is the weakest link. So, if I can get Seven up to par, imagine what that'll do for the rest of Rockford, we'll have more investors, we'll have more residents who are more apt to stay, and not trying to move. We'll have better, you know, job opportunities, we'll have higher paying job opportunities. Individuals aren't just struggling to live and to get by, but actually able to invest their income and invest in property, different properties, you know, and actually live life. Not just, you know, kind of working from paycheck to paycheck, but really, you know, really develop those skills. And it's like, you know, once we get that going, you know, what will that do to our mental health? And once our mental health is there, and I don't think a lot of people understand how much your mental health can really affect all of it. If, like, imagine what we can do once we start to break down some of those.

Haley: Exactly, one thing that I've really noticed throughout conducting these interviews, is that

Rockford, as a whole, seems very committed to bettering itself as a community, becoming a more sustainable community. And trying to just, like you said, get better.

Janessa: Yeah, I mean, you have to, you have to, and, you know, it's, I know, it can be definitely frustrating when you don't see the results immediately, or even within the next, you know, couple of years. But one thing you have to understand, and it took me a while to get here now, just go on record and say that is that, you know, when you go through different administrations different City leaders, different elected officials, everyone has different agendas. And so when you have changes like that, and the agendas change, and things like that, things don't move at a pace that you would need it to. So while we all know and it's been said that Rockford is a planning city, we've been planning for years, we're not actually doing anything. I really feel like the tables that I've been at in the conversations that I've been involved in, that the leaders that we have right now are implementing these plans.

Haley: Like they want action.

Janessa: Oh, yeah, we've had the listening sessions. And we're still having them, we're having one tomorrow, matter of fact. Where residents are able to talk with the leaders in the City and voice their concerns, or even suggestions on some of the processes that we have or things like that. And so it's just, it's motivating because, like I said, you know, it doesn't happen overnight. But the fact that our leaders are really stepping up and really taking into action, and just bettering the community and bringing other folks in to see what we're doing. We'll get there.

Haley: Yeah.

Janessa: We'll get there. You know, the arc wasn't built overnight. It's gonna happen. So, I know it can be frustrating like I said, because, like I said, you know, they're still, they're working in the downtown area right now. And as much as I want to say, "No, we need this over here on Seven," and you know, "You need to do this," which, trust me, I have said before.

Haley: Yeah.

Janessa: I have to remember the overall, the bigger picture. You know, what I might want right now, you know, like I said, the City can't put everything that they would want to or even needs to into my area right now because the focus isn't on my area. And I, and I'm okay with that.

Haley: Okay.

Janessa: I'm okay with that. Because like I said, the people in my area are stepping up to help do it.

Haley: Like they want, they want the community to be better, so they're willing to roll up their sleeves and get it done.

Janessa: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Definitely. And that's half the battle right there.

Haley: One thing that I did notice when I was looking at these maps is, I looked at one on like the city of Rockford's website, and they had a whole bunch of maps. And I looked at their capital improvement project map, and they had all these projects throughout all the City, except for the northwest side of Rockford, pretty much north of Auburn, they had no type of capital improvement projects, which coincides with your ward. So, you know, I think the only type of study or project that was kind of going on over there was the Auburn Street corridor study. Do you know anything about that?

Janessa: Yes. Auburn Street and yes, yes, yes. They just started with the research on that. And it is going to take some years, that's not projected to be completed until, or even started until 2025.

Haley: Okay.

Janessa: Right now, something that's going to happen beforehand is Whitman street. We're going to be doing that, there's like, there's a piece of that strip there that we, us locals, called Dead Man's curve, just because there's a site barrier coming around a major curve, you've got some houses there, so we're looking at doing that first. So we'll be definitely having some listening sessions and inviting the neighbors out, getting their input on what they'll want to have maybe taken, you know, some couple lights out and putting in a one lane roundabout with things like that. So yeah, there are definitely things going on or coming to about, and like I said, you're not going to see that on the plan right now. We're not the focus right now. And so, you just you have to be okay with that. And I am okay with that because the conversations that I'm having right now, are looking at, like I said, that 2025 time or, you know, maybe even before then to where we can really start to get some traction on there. But, you know, it's like, they've got different parts that they had already started before I got into this position. And what kind of sense would it make to say, well stop that now and come over here, work over here, and then you can finish up, you know, it doesn't work like that. And so, you know, you just you got to be comfortable with waiting your turn.

Haley: Yeah.

Janessa: And again, I know, we've been waiting for a while, like decades, but that's what happens when you've had, you know, people before, who were kind of dragging hills with everything. And that's exactly what was happening. But like I said, with this administration that we have now, I really feel like they're pushing the needle and really, really pushing to get some things done and accomplished throughout the City and for the betterment of the entire city. It's just, you know, we only get a certain amount of money that we could work with. And we've had some snags, of course, we've had a full pandemic happen.

Haley: Yep.

Janessa: So, it's like, you know, funding is a little, it's a little tricky right now. So, you know, what they were projecting, you know, maybe has to, you know, maybe how's the delay or whatever, but it's coming, it's coming. And so like I said, for when you're looking at things like that, like on the City's website, no, you're not going to see it, but just understand things are being done. We're working where, like I said, grants are something that we're doing, we're even applying for the Regrow grant, which is for, you know, things targeted towards our side of town, and we're working together on that. It's like 15 different organizations within the ward that we'll be working to get that grant and work together over the next couple of years to bring about positive events for individuals to attend for all ages, you know, family friendly events, environmental awareness events, it's all across the board. And so like I said, it's just, it's a collaborative effort. It's just going to look different, right?

Haley: Yeah. Yeah. So, are these corridor studies just, like what are, what are they looking for? Safety in regards to transit?

Janessa: Yes. And they look like crap. I mean, beautification. So some areas, because some of the areas on the road are tighter than another. So we, you know, we have to look at things like that, and what makes sense for for, for the ward. And it's not just seven, I'm in conjunction with 13. And, and I think it's five that are right next to me. So it's pieces of two different wards. So I'll definitely have to be working with two other aldermen to get everything complete, but it's coming. I'm excited about the Whitman street actually met with some City officials last week, to go over it before we roll it out to the public on their suggestions, but I like it. It's not anything set in stone, it's what the City and the professionals have come up with. But it's nothing that's concrete at all. Like they're really waiting and wanting to have that input from the residents to see what it is that makes sense to them. They recognize that they are the true professionals of their neighborhood, they're, you know, they're the advocate. So it's like, you know, we want to push their voices to be heard in this. So I really, like I said, I think some great things are gonna come from it.

Haley: Yeah, you know, you were discussing how you have to wait your turn, essentially, because they're focusing on downtown and putting money there. How do you feel is a fair way to decide what communities get worked on first? Or do you feel like there's a better way to distribute the work so that each community is being taken care of, bit by bit? How do you feel like is the best way to approach that.

Janessa: Let me go on record and say this is just my feeling, not anyone else's. But, you know, I've struggled with that, I really have, Haley, I've struggled with that. And I get that everyone would want something to be done in their neighborhoods and all around and, really, it should be. But it's like, for what I know that the City is trying to accomplish and the outreach that we're doing for, to bring in more tourists and things like that, it's like that would take longer for them to get done what they need to in that downtown area and the surrounding areas. It would, and so it's like then we would just be delaying everything on what they're trying to do. And so while I get, you know, you do have to put your resources in all areas, I do see their logic in it. It's like do we work on 13 or 14 different pieces of Rockford and take 30 years to do it because we want to

evenly distribute that money or do we get this area in Rockford that we know we can generate a lot of money from once we do get it up to par from our tourists and, you know, outside vendors and even investors and then be ready to go in four to five years.

Haley: Yeah, okay.

Janessa: You know, so like I said, yeah, it sucks. And yeah, I've been pissed off. And yeah, went off about it and, you know, said some maybe so, not so nice things to individuals before about it, because I'm so frustrated with it.

Haley: As you should.

Janessa: But when I sit down and I look at it, and I take my feelings and emotions out of it, and I look at it from an economic point of view and a business point of view, I get it. And so that's why I said it is important for us right now for us to work together. And while I know those federal dollars, you know, a lot of it isn't going to come our way. That's why we're seeking grants, we're seeking out other funding, we're not just going to be sitting here like we've been doing for years and waiting for the City to take care of us, we're going to do it ourselves. And so hopefully, by the time they are ready for us, we're better and we're more in a position to where we can say, "Hey, we've made improvements here and there. Now we need to utilize these dollars for this and that," and I feel like we'll get even more money, because then the City will feel like they're not wasting their money on things that will one, be destroyed. And two, you know, it's like, that's just the way it is like, it's like, take it like this, like, we're in an area where we've got high, we're high in crime, you know. And it, like you said, when you look at the area, it's not the most beautiful part of the City. And so it's like, are we and that's where we got to go back to that mental thing. Are we mentally ready to have what needs to be over and Ward Seven? Would we take care of it? Do we have that interaction and that those partnerships, and that those volunteering individuals that would maintain it? If we were to get all that money, if they, if the City were to say, "You know what, we're going to put all the money that we get from our ARPA funding in the federal funding into Ward Seven, we're going to fix it up." How would Ward Seven look five years from now. That's what, that's what I have to keep in the back of my mind. Are we mentally ready for that? And some of us are, but as a majority, as a whole, we're not.

Haley: Okay, so this is kind of like a question that me and my friends will discuss, kind of trying to figure out what's the way around this because, and I actually spoke about this with the brownfields specialist, Robert Wilhelmi. So you put, you know, this money into these neighborhoods, to improve them, however, that raises the property taxes inherently, like the property values.

Janessa: Right.

Haley: So where's the line between bettering a neighborhood and then gentrification

Janessa: It's called Red Line.

Haley: Oh, yeah.

Janessa: To put it mildly. But, man, but and that's why I said that what we're doing right now is most important, because right now we're focusing on the little guy that's what I'm working with, we're a little guy. And so we got a bunch of little guys working together. But these little guys are creating events that are targeting and are giving life skills to individuals who don't have the proper education level to go on and to even, unfortunately, even just fill out an application. We're providing beyond life skills, you know, we've got organizations working with our youth to combat the crime, the mental health awareness, we're working with places like you know, our Family Peace Center, to where we can get free counseling and things like that going, positive events. Like I said, once these things happen, and we have economic development in the area, like you, like you just mentioned, yeah, things are going to go up. So how do we sustain that? Well, we got to get people financial, you know, financial literacy, which is something that we're working on at a state level to get passed, hopefully, to where we can, it'll maybe possibly be mandated for individuals, you know, so it's like, we gotta get, we gotta get us ready before all of that happens. So, like I said, it's all about the little guys and the nonprofits.

Haley: Yes.

Janessa: It's a nonprofit world right now that needs to, that we can utilize to help where we need to be. But unfortunately, you know, that is going to be an issue. But it's not something that we can place too much emphasis on. Because it's like, if we concern ourselves completely with that, where will we get as a community, knowing everything else in the world is going up? Everything is going up in the US period. So in order for, you know, it just wouldn't be smarter for us to think that, well, we're just going to keep it like this. Because if we're just gonna keep it like this, then, you know, we're not going to get anywhere.

Haley: Yeah, exactly.

Janessa: So, but it, you know, and then two, you got to think, okay, well, what do you want Rockford to look like? Do you want Rockford to look like, you know, majority of, you know, places where individuals can't afford housing, and we go right back to what we've been trying to stop. And that's the implements of more low income housing units, which has proven time and time again, it just doesn't work. You know, it's like, you need to separate those individuals. But, you know, it's a overall issue.

Haley: Yeah.

Janessa: You know, when we started, you know, and we placed that, the legislation No Child Left Behind, that's when we left behind everybody because now they're looking at where people are in terms of progression. That's how they're getting their grades. So you may have started out in like, maybe a first grade reading level in the, in the sixth grade. But have you progress? Did you progress during that school year? And if you have, you get passed on.

Haley: Yeah.

Janessa: So, but that's not necessarily where you should be at an education level. So when you have individuals that are graduating high school, and they graduate high school, and they're realizing they get out there, "Oh, I need to be able to fill out an application, I mean, I need to be able to take a test, sometimes even have a good credit score," because a lot of companies are even doing credit checks right now, hiring. When you have, when you have when you've created an issue like that, that is a ripple effect, a domino effect.

Haley: Yeah.

Janessa: It's having an effect on our crime. It just, everything, everything. Because like I said, when you have these individuals who don't have the skill sets to go out and get those higher paying jobs that they would need, in order to, you know, support their families and things like that, that's what you have. That's what you're gonna have, we're seeing the effects of all of that. And when these children and these adults get older, and they know, and even as a young adult, they know and they realize an importance of their life has been lost, and it's not there.

Haley: Yeah.

Janessa: They don't feel like they're important or valued. And so, why should they feel anything else is important and valued?

Haley: Exactly.

Janessa: Why should they take care of it? No one's taking care of them, or pushing them or even caring about that they're where they need to be in order to even just survive.

Haley: It's dehumanizing.

Janessa: Yes, yes, it very much is. But then you may have individuals who have that luck of the draw, and they can just get those jobs just based off of, maybe, who they know or what they look like. So that's...

Haley: And it shouldn't operate like that.

Janessa: Well, you know, when the world gives you, you know, the glasses to look through and with those clear lens, you got to look at things for what they are, not for what they should be.

Haley: That is true, though. That is true.

Janessa: When you look at things for what they are, and that's when you can start maybe writing some things down on what needs to happen. But, like I said, it's the issues in the area, I

mean, they start at a young age, unfortunately. And that's when we're just, we're passing these kids along and not educating them. Education is our biggest issue in the area.

Haley: Yes.

Janessa: People don't even they don't know anything about government, math, anything, you know, social studies, history. We're just, we're passing them along and, unfortunately, that's what we're dealing with right now. And that's what you'll see.

Haley: I think now would be a good time to wrap up part one of this episode. ***Outro Music*** As always, I would love to thank Janessa Wilkins for sharing her valuable insight during part one of this discussion. I would also like to thank anyone listening in on this podcast. As always, I appreciate your support of *Green Exploration: Rockford*. I would just like to remind you to take whatever you learn from this series, and consider how you as an individual can be a contributor to a sustainable future in your day-to-day life. And don't forget to not only show Mother Earth some love, but your fellow humans as well, each and every one of them because all humans deserve to live in a quality environment. My name is Haley Dahl, and I am signing off. Stay green and stay exploring, Rockford.