

Janessa Wilkins, City of Rockford: Part 2

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Rockford, happening, people, residents, Seventh Ward, City, community, environmental challenges, problems, feel, homes, education, disparities, project

Haley: Hello, my name is Haley Dahl and welcome to another episode of *Green Exploration: Rockford*. Today, we will be continuing our discussion with Janessa Wilkins, the Seventh Ward alderman of the City of Rockford, diving deeper into our discussion regarding the social and environmental issues Rockford faces today, and exploring how inclusive education and the implementation of sustainable green infrastructure in neighborhoods such as the Seventh Ward can offer viable solutions to these problems. ***Intro Music*** Sustainability, as a whole, is a very multifaceted, very complex issue, but that route, the educational route, doesn't change.

Janessa: Yeah.

Haley: No matter what pillar of sustainability you're dealing with.

Janessa: Exactly.

Haley: There's a lot of different pieces of the way this whole system works. That is just, I don't know, I feel like we need almost like a society overhaul. We need to polish everything.

Janessa: Oh yeah, definitely. We need more humans in these quote, unquote, political scenes.

Haley: Yes, we need to come back to our humanity. I've actually been saying that we are so quick to abandon that, whether it comes down to social issues or environmental issues. We all want to jump straight to the dollar, while leaving behind our neighbors, leaving behind our fellow species on our planet, leaving behind our own whole planet.

Janessa: Yeah.

Haley: Because we think that the dollar is gonna save us. No! Maybe if you can try to go fly to Mars and try to make that work out, but if we can't even take care of each other and take care of our home planet, how would we do better elsewhere? You know what I mean?

Janessa: Yup. Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. And that's a good point that you bring up and really, honestly, you don't even need the dollar. Well, let me take that back. You don't even need the dollars to make it happen to be quite honest. Because let me ask you, you got, you've got, think about your family, or maybe your close friends. If one of your family members or close friend came here and was like, "Haley, you know, I really need to get my car fixed, but I don't have any money. I know you know how to fix cars. So I know that you need to get your kitchen redone. Now, I can do your kitchen for you and I'll do it at no cost, but I really need you to fix on my car. Would you do it?"

Haley: Yeah. That's...

Janessa: You would, right?

Haley: Would that be more like, is it bartering, trading?

Janessa: Yeah, it sounds more like a human interaction to me.

Haley: Yes.

Janessa: But you can term it how you like.

Haley: Well, yeah, I guess I was thinking like more, you know, way back in the day. They'd be like, "I have a pig. I want your cow. Like I'll give you two pigs for your cow"

Janessa: That's what we have to get back to. But we can't get there because we don't even have a skill set. We've got kids, we've got adults out there, they don't even know how to do their own frickin laundr, they don't know how to change tires, they don't know how to wash dishes. They don't even know how to, some of them don't even know how to, you know, wash their bodies properly, but it's very sad. So how can we even get to that point, without even giving these children our these young adults skill sets in order to survive, we've come so dependent on the dollar. And that's, that's the key. They made us so dependent on the dollar, they take our skill sets away.

Haley: It's not even real really, it's just something we kind of agree has value.

Janessa: Because we can get the work done in our neighborhoods, if we work together. We've got carpenters, we've got people who work in concrete businesses who own these businesses.

Haley: Electricians.

Janessa: We've got a bunch of assets, right? But you know, the division has become so great, that, you know, and nobody's working together, no one, nothing's getting done. And again, we're depending on that dollar to come our way, forgetting the fact that we can do it ourself. But again, we got to have that skill set. And then you'll have, you know, some individuals who say, "Well, I'm not getting paid for this, or this and that, and I'm not doing that." But you do have individuals who will. And for those

individuals who say, "Well, I'm not getting paid for it," well, you might not be getting paid for this, but what do you need? We can work together and do that. You don't see that anymore. But that's definitely something that's possible. But again, you gotta have a skill set.

Haley: Education and collaboration.

Janessa: There you go, education and collaboration. I mean, that's the environment. We got to do it with our environmental, so why don't, why do we think we don't have to do it with anything else?

Haley: Exactly.

Janessa: It's a collaborative effort.

Haley: Going back to, you know, some of these environmental things that are going on in the ward. I remember on our phone call, we discussed how, you know, this is a food desert, you know, you mentioned it was a National Flood Zone. There was discussion about how there was supposed to be the hospital out there, and then they opted to put it on Riverside, closer to the highway. How would you define these environmental challenges in the Seventh Ward? Considering these environmental challenges, what are your thoughts on Rockford taking action towards implementing solutions to these in your ward? I'm assuming based on our conversation, they're not doing much, in respect to addressing some of the ward's environmental challenges. With this, with the ward being predominantly Black, do you feel like there is a disparity there, in regards to environmental quality and protection due to environmental racism?

Janessa: So yes, we are in a National Flood Zone. And to be clear, there are multiple areas that are in, have been declared multiple flood zones that are outside of Ward Seven. What Rockford is doing is what it can do right now, the City, without just asking the government for probably about a billion dollars to make us get to where we need to be. Because like I said, our area is a highly congested residential area. And so to help with the flooding, we would have to create a lot more green spaces. Things that we'll be proposing...

Haley: Green infrastructure!

Janessa: There ya go. But then you'd be talking about asking residents or making, excuse me, making residents move from their homes to another area.

Haley: Yeah.

Janessa: Now, when we have, like you said, a majority of minorities who are low income, if we forced them out of their homes, what area of town could they go to?

Haley: Yeah.

Janessa: There isn't. So it's like, what do you do?

Haley: I guess...

Janessa: We're at a standstill.

Haley: ... yeah.

Janessa: So what's, I feel like what's happening is the City's kind of waiting it out to see who might go, who might stay, and then once we kind of, you know, have these areas, and we're now looking at, you know, what we could possibly do with different properties or parcels. And, like you say, creating some more green spaces, then we can kind of get to making some goals on, you know, where we're at then and where we want to be going forward. But right now, in this national, being in this flood zone, hands are kind of tied.

Haley: Yeah.

Janessa: We've got that hospital there. That's, you know, just kind of been an eyesore, everyone is disappointed about, like you said, they've had to move, you know, one more health facility out away from our area. And that project right there, in order to fix just that project, right, there was over 30 million. And so the hospital didn't feel it was their responsibility to pay for it, because that's an environmental thing, that's a City thing. And the City thought that they shouldn't pay for it, because that's their property. So who has 30 plus million to just pull out, you know, their pocket to make this happen? No one. And so when no one, you know, when they decided to put their hands up, and you know, because they were, they were talking about maybe, you know, what kind of a band-aid thing, which that was going to be, even that was like an \$8 million proposal. You know, it's like, and it wasn't going to stop the issues, the flooding, it would help, but it wasn't going to stop the issue with the flooding. And so, you know, some things, unfortunately, you got to weigh your pros and cons on. So, you know, as much as we definitely need a health care facility in our area, that spot right there, just maybe not, isn't the best, because the residents have a lot of flooding issues in their homes. And these are individuals who work hard and invest, some of them invested their whole lives or their parents have just to have those homes. And so like I said, so in order to fix it, we need some homes out, but what are you gonna do, you're gonna force people?

Haley: Yeah.

Janessa: Or are you going to wait it out and see if they can come up with the funding to do it themselves? Like I said, you've literally have to raise up the homes in that area, I believe, like two feet.

Haley: I know with the Keith Creek area, is that the Churchill Park area? They demolished homes in that floodplain.

Janessa: Yeah.

Haley: And they're going to try to make a greenway there now.

Janessa: Yeah.

Haley: Like you said, that displaces people, and what do you do with people?

Janessa: Right, and especially low income, and then you have individuals on different parts of town who have higher income residents there, who don't necessarily want, you know, lower income residents and their neighborhoods, or maybe the housing facilities to where you have units that are maybe 160 units or, you know, something like that, because, again, they seen problems with that in the past, and they don't want their property values to go down. You know, and so it's just, it's a lot of, it's a lot of factoring that you have to do.

Haley: Oh, yeah.

Janessa: It's easy for me to say, or anyone else to say, who lives in the area, "Well, they ain't doing this. They're not doing this for that." But when you, like I said, when you remove your emotions and your feelings from it, and you look at it from an economical standpoint, you start to understand and look at it differently, and at least really, at least start to just have that understanding and respect for what they are trying to accomplish with the City and not, you know, just piss everybody off.

Haley: Actually, I remember a discussion with Representative Sean Casten. He visited UIC, a part of Engineers for a Sustainable World, and he was speaking to us. And I remember that was one thing that he was talking about is how, you know, sustainability is amazing and, you know, trying to tackle these problems altruistically is great, but practically, that's not going to happen. And if you want things to happen, you have to make them economically attractive. So he was like, we need to find solutions to these problems in a way that will economically attract people like a balance.

Janessa: And I have to give kudos to what our City's doing, especially, I don't know if I should name drop or not. But I'll just say, individuals from the City, because in terms of where we were maybe 10 years ago, and I'll even just say 2014, because that was kinda really bad, and we were going through some lawsuits with water. You know, they're hosting a lot of different seminars, and webinars and things like that, to talk about the environmental concerns, like water testing that happens where, you know, you can take your water and get that tested, you know, seeing how that is, and I didn't even know you're supposed to run your water for two minutes, before you even start to use it, just because you've got water that's been sitting in the, in the pipes. And so you want to make sure that all of that gets through, and that way you're getting your better quality of water.

Haley: I didn't know that either.

Janessa: You know, those are things that they're discussing, and they're letting the public know, you know, and they're going above and beyond and making sure that we understand our role as a resident and what we can do to help for just our, at our properties. And then, you know, they're letting you know, and they're keeping us in the loop on what they've got going around the City. They make public notices, they have listening sessions, they, you know, they, they're attending neighborhood association, you

know, giving them, you know, the updates and agendas for what they got going on, even having public meetings, you know, to address anyone's concerns and things like that. So, like I said, there are some great things that are happening. Yeah, we can, yes, there's improvements for others, but there's so much negativity, in terms of Rockford in my area. We got to start to change the conversation. So yeah, there's room for improvement. But let's talk about what is happening.

Haley: Exactly. Is there good turnouts on those listening sessions?

Janessa: Yes, some are better than others. But yeah, they're good turnouts. And we get some good feedback.

Haley: That's good.

Janessa: Yeah, yeah. Like I said, we're having one tomorrow, down at our District 1 police station. Anyone from the city can come down. We're having city officials there. You can talk to individuals that are heads of the departments and voice your concerns, suggestions right there with the individuals that are responsible for it. You're not, it's not like, "Oh, I'm going to email or anything like that you're going to have you can have conversations with these people." But, yeah, like I said, it's, we're definitely, I think we're on the right track. Like I said, it can definitely be frustrating at times when you don't see the progression happening for you, that you'll maybe see in other areas of town, but at the end of the day, we're all working towards the same goal.

Haley: Yeah.

Janessa: We have different fights that we need to do. And we just got to do it.

Haley: Exactly. Got to band together and help each other out. Especially our neighbors who, because I know like a lot of people, if it's not happening to them, they just don't care. But it's like, no, life is beyond your worldview and people, but that also comes down to the education. A lot of people just really, like I said, don't know or don't care to know.

Janessa: Yeah, well, that's I mean, when you don't have, when no one places an emphasis on education. That's, this is what you get.

Haley: Yeah.

Janessa: And we're looking at, we're saying we, you know, it's so easy to say, "Well, these parents need to be with their kids, and they need to do their job." Well guess what, their parents were a part of the generation that didn't get taught either. So like you said, it's not just a one, it's not just one thing. It's not just the youth, it's not just the young adults, it's not just the seniors, the senior residents who, you know, might be stuck in their ways. It's, it's all around.

Haley: Everything's kind of starting to come to a head and it's time to be addressed for sure.

Janessa: Well, and it wasn't like this when I was growing up. And I'm glad I was an '80s baby. My teachers cared, my mom cared and she placed an emphasis on education. My friends, they had an emphasis on education. We did positive things together all the time. So I don't know exactly when things changed, but they definitely did. But it has not always been like this. I know that to be a fact, because I feel like I had a great education, but again, when you don't have a parent like that, you know, or you've got a parent that's not really, really there in your life, for whatever reason, because there are some that are just working their tails off just to make ends meet. But when you don't have that adult figure in your life that is showing you and being an example of being that positive resident in your community, and one that gives back to your community, this is what happens.

Haley: Yeah.

Janessa: And really, just from me being in the community, I can tell you this, anyone that is involved in their community, regardless, on their education level, there are opportunities for individuals who give back to their community that others won't, just because of the people that you'll meet.

Haley: Yeah.

Janessa: And the resources that they have, and are willing to share and give to you, in order to get you where you need to be. All you got to do is have that love for your neighborhood, that love for your community. And, like I said, if you get involved in it, I guarantee you, you will find yourself in a place to where you have networked or worked with individuals that can help you get and reach the goals that you set to accomplish. And even just even start to write down, because a lot of people don't even have goals. But it's really just placing yourself around those individuals that can do that. But we've, like I said, I've, we've gotten so confined to staying in our homes for whatever reason, or not talking about what's going on in our homes or in our mental spaces. Because, unfortunately, that was my generation who said, "No, don't talk about it. What happens in the house stays in the house," and you know, all this other stuff. It's a bunch of crap if you ask me. But once we start talking, and getting out and interacting and building that rapport with others around us, we'll start to see things change. Because like me, and you talked about earlier, when someone needs something and you do something for them, nine times out of 10 when you need something done, they're going to do it for you.

Haley: Exactly. And then actually, you know, going back to that community engagement, you mentioned there's only, like, three sit down restaurants in Ward Seven, highly residential community. And, like I said, I remember you mentioning on the phone call that it was a food desert.

Janessa: yeah, I would like to be able to shop in my area and maybe go get a, you know, an outfit or something. And, like you said, sit down at a restaurant other than Burger King, McDonald's, something like that. But you know, we've got Sister's, and I'm trying to think what other, we got a Gyro House. But, yeah, we need more. Because, like I said, we have to travel maybe about a 20 minute drive just to get anywhere else. And you know, transportation is a big issue for us.

Haley: Yeah. I heard that the Rockford Transit is trying to become more accessible for the community. Is that true or?

Janessa: Oh, very true. The director over there, he's a great guy. I had called them needing some help with an organization that was, you know, dealing with individuals that had been incarcerated. And we wanted to make sure that they had transportation to get to their classes. And the director, he was more than willing to, you know, hand out passes and things like that. And they do that quite often for organizations and even just different parts of the City as a whole, so Rockford Metro Transit Department, they're definitely a big advocate for those who, like I said, have though, are facing those disparities.

Haley: Okay.

Janessa: Very happy with them.

Haley: Okay, okay.

Janessa: I will say we do have a solar program that is about to take place starting September 14 [, 2021]. It is not in Ward Seven, but it is literally across the street from Ward Seven.

Haley: Okay.

Janessa: So, and that is kind of like a reentry program with individuals that have been incarcerated that will be able to take these courses and they have guaranteed job placement for these individuals, starting at \$40,000 annually.

Haley: Okay.

Janessa: So I am excited about that. We do have some solar, we do have some solar things going on again. Yes, no, it's not it In Ward Seven directly, but very, very close, very, very close for some of those projects, so, again, put time, I can see that happening. But again, we're right now we're fighting for space. So we just, we've got to look at what makes sense. And as much as I'd like to create a big old football field and put some solar panels up in there, it just, it doesn't fit right now. So we'll possibly have to look at that later on down the line.

Haley: How do you feel that Rockford can, actually, I feel like we kind of answered that. Because I was going to ask how can Rockford implement more inclusive solutions to the environmental challenges that the city faces?

Janessa: Working with the residents, for sure.

Haley: Community outreach, public outreach?

Janessa: Yep, yeah. Getting the residents voices and actually using them to implement the things that they're voicing that they would like. Because we're the experts, you know, we're the experts of our own

neighborhoods, our own blocks and things like that. So the more the City works with the residents, the better it'll all be.

Haley: And I'm not, I'm unsure if you'll be able to comment on this, but I'll ask it anyways. Would you say that Rockford struggles with the equity issue?

Janessa: Yes.

Haley: Yeah. With that, do you see things going in a more positive direction?

Janessa: No.

Haley: No? Okay. Do you have anything you want to add there? Or anything you could possibly suggest for the City to get it going in a more positive direction in that respect?

Janessa: I'm gonna have to say, no, I think I'm gonna get in trouble for what I will say.

Haley: I understand. I understand. There's like a lot of, a lot of things that unfortunately, like, to me, they're not radical views, but to society, and the way that it operates today, can be seen that way. But, again, I feel like that just comes back to what we were discussing earlier, how we really need to come back to our humanity as a whole, not even just in Rockford, but everywhere.

Janessa: I agree. I agree. It, again, though, that just it all just goes back to education. We just, we need to become better educated. I know right now, for everything that's happening in the world, it's daunting.

Haley: Thank you so much for sharing all your insight. I have one more, one more question. And it's a side note, because it doesn't really directly relate to what we were just talking about. But, you know, I know that my podcast, green slash sustainable infrastructure is one of the focuses. So I guess I was wondering if you had any sustainable infrastructure ideas that you feel like the ward could utilize in the future? Or is it just, does the whole ward need an infrastructure overhaul?

Janessa: The whole day long war, girl.

Haley: Yeah.

Janessa: It's pretty bad. I ain't gonna lie to you. It's pretty bad. But like I said, just with, I have ideas, but just seeing, like, the maps and talking with City officials is like, those ideas don't even make sense with the way things are right now. And so it's like, question marks just sitting on top of my head, like a cartoon character, like I'm lost? Like, like what do we do without hurting...

Haley: Because it's just, like, such a big problem, like, where do you start? Yeah.

Janessa: Yup, yup.

Haley: Bit by bit.

Janessa: Stay tuned.

Haley: And shout out to those volunteers working in the ward for sure. We appreciate you.

Janessa: Yeah, definitely appreciate them. Like I said, we can start to begin to look at creating more green spaces and things like that once we start to get a handle. I'd say maybe, maybe I'll say this, then to answer your question, maybe that all starts with tackling our blight issue.

Haley: Yeah.

Janessa: And the City is even sending me and four other individuals, we were selected throughout Illinois, we will be going out to Texas to learn more about tackling blight issues and what other ones these are doing. So again, you know, it might not be something that you see right now on a map or in the planning per se, but it's definitely happening.

Haley: That's good.

Janessa: It's definitely happening. I was just gonna say, you know, when talking with individuals and getting some of the things that they're saying, if it's any suggestions that you think are worthy of me knowing, definitely let me know. I can take it to the City, and like I said, any way I can help and you know, get you whatever numbers or data that you might need just let me know. I trust anyone who sits in a Chicago Bears chair.

Haley: Yeah! There we go, shoutout to Dad.

Janessa: Oh yeah, that means you got some you got some loyal people around you.

Haley: Oh yeah, yeah, believe me, my dad, he's a Bears fan. And like even before the Cubs won the World Series, die hard Cubs fan.

Janessa: Yeah. I looked at a poster of Mike Singletary all growing up my whole life. My mom is a major, major football fan, but always been a Bears fan, ride or die. No matter how good or bad they were doing.

Haley: Yup.

Janessa: Always Bears, so that's why I say to anybody who's still sporting Bears paraphernalia, oh, yeah. I want to talk to you. You're loyalty, sir.

Haley: There's one thing I am very loyal to, the people and the things that I care about. So don't have to worry about that with me.

Janessa: Well. keep it up, Miss Haley. I love what you're doing. Love your personality.

Haley: Ahhh, you too, Janessa, you know, you really, you really care about what you do, and that's important. Very important in politicians.

Janessa: I care about my community.

Haley: Yes. As you should.

Janessa: Well, do you know how much aldermen make in Rockford?

Haley: Oh, I have no clue, to be honest.

Janessa: Okay, I ain't in it for the money. I can tell you that much.

Haley: Well, I could tell just based off talking to you.

Janessa: Man, yeah, that's definitely not the case for me. But, yeah, people have asked me they're like, "Yeah, are you gonna run for mayor, you see yourself going up?" I said, "Look, God willing, these people will hopefully be stuck with me for the next eight years, what I want to accomplish and what I, what I feel like needs to happen, it's not going to happen in one term, we really got to get the wheel moving." And something that also happens and has had a negative impact on our community is we have individuals who get the ball rolling, and then they get promoted, or they go somewhere else, or they get these high paying jobs to where they're now behind the desk. They're not at that root level. They're not talking to residents anymore. And then what happens, that ball is dropped. It's no longer moving. And so like I said, God willing, they will be stuck with me for the next eight. Now after that, once we once we got some traction going after that, you look for me. Me and you might be together. We might be together.

Haley: Yeah!

Janessa: They've got a whole engineering division under the public work sector of the City, so you can be maybe involved in the street division, water division, maybe the quality, or they've even got the Environmental Laboratory.

Haley: Really?

Janessa: Yeah, but thank you for your time. Again, thank you for the work that you're doing. I wish you nothing but the best in the future. Again, if I can do anything to help you need me to talk or whatever. Just just let me know.

Haley: Thank you so much for your insight and taking the time out of your day to have this discussion because I've learned a lot and I've been really, really enjoying it. So thank you.

Haley: I think now would be a good time to wrap up part two of this episode. ***Outro Music*** As always, I would love to thank Janessa Wilkins for sharing her valuable insight during part two of this discussion. I would also like to thank anyone listening in on this podcast, as I always 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.