

# Columbia Missourian

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## Holden homes in on residents' issues

By LINDSAY TOLER

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Mike Holden walked quickly between the houses. The temperature was falling to the low 40s as a pink-and-orange sunset dropped through the silhouettes of tree branches. Holden had been up since 5:30 that morning traveling for work from Columbia to Rolla, and then making a stop in Jefferson City before coming home. And tonight, he would spend the remaining daylight knocking on doors and dropping off information to voters.

It had been a long day, but there was no sign of strain in his voice.

"I'm looking forward to daylight-saving time," Holden said. "I get another hour of this."

He smiled and turned to the next house.

"Hi, I'm Mike Holden," he told the person who answered the door. "I'm running for City Council. Just wanted to drop off some information."

After 18 years working in business, Holden often looks at city issues as though he were still sitting at his desk. He called the city of Columbia "a municipal corporation" complete with employees, income and customers.

"The people in the community are customers of the city," Holden said. "And the customer is always right."

Holden serves as president of Guaranty Land Title Insurance, a company founded by his mother, Sandra Sue Holden, in 1988.

He started with his mother's company in 1989, the same year he graduated from Hickman High School, and worked his way to a management position in Jefferson City five years later. He was named president in 1997 after his mother retired.

Holden celebrated his one-year wedding anniversary with his wife, Elizabeth Holden, on Feb. 18.

"We always have things to talk about because of the work we do," said Elizabeth, who owns her own nonprofit government consulting business called Prime Point. Their mutual love for governance issues sometimes leaves Elizabeth feeling like she's "preaching to the choir."

"As long as I've known Mike, it's been something he's been interested in and wanting to do," Elizabeth said about running for the council. "He's just had this in him his entire life."

Whether he's working at his office, speaking at a forum or canvassing a Fourth Ward neighborhood, Holden is usually dressed in business attire -- a solid button-up collared shirt and the occasional tie or jacket. He seems most at ease in his office, drinking a yellow bottle of Gatorade and leaning back in one of the large black chairs that surround the conference room table.

Discussing issues at forums, Holden speaks clearly and slowly, channeling his energy by leaning forward and using hand gestures; one on one, he seems more reserved. He stands with even weight on both feet, crossing his hands in front of his body and listening with a close-lipped smile.

Holden began his campaign by polling friends for the “hot-button issues” in the Fourth Ward.

“In my canvassing, I’ve come up with more,” he said. “They are not necessarily the issues I started with.”

One issue Holden pressed at the beginning of his campaign was expanding the city’s use of the Internet for public services, such as purchasing dog licenses and joining sports leagues.

But as he knocked on more doors, Holden found other issues more specific to the Fourth Ward -- such as repairing sidewalks and fixing sewer systems -- held more traction with residents.

“There are a lot of issues out there that are localized to neighborhoods,” said Holden. “I want to be true to the Fourth Ward.”

Early in the campaign, Holden said he would be increasing his canvassing efforts and getting feedback from neighborhoods before setting a platform.

“I usually spend an hour and a half after work on days when I don’t have anything,” Holden said. That’s a lesson he learned after launching an unsuccessful campaign for the Sixth Ward seat in 1997, when he canvassed neighborhoods for only the last three weekends before the election.

“It’s nothing scientific or anything,” Holden said about canvassing. “I count to 20 and listen for sounds. If I get to 20 with no sounds, no nothing, I leave my stuff and go.”

## On the issues

**COUNCIL PAY:** Holden said hiring city staff to act as liaisons between council members and constituents might alleviate some of their daily duties and serve as an alternative to council pay. He called pay for council members a “moving target,” meaning that while a small stipend could reimburse council members for expenses related to their service, too much could take away from the council’s volunteer spirit.

“You don’t want pay for council members to be so high that it is attractive as a potential job,” Holden said.

**WARDS:** Holden thinks Columbia residents are underrepresented in the six-ward system. He said electing two additional “mayors,” or councilpersons-at-large, to create a nine-person council could allow for more constituent representation. He also mentioned two council members per ward as a possible solution.

**SNOW REMOVAL:** Holden supports acquiring dual-use vehicles that can be equipped to remove snow but also serve the city’s daily needs.

“We need to be buying a truck that, when we have a 14-inch snowfall, that we can slap a snowplow on it and plow the streets,” Holden said. “The idea of dual-use vehicles has got to be a mantra.”

**POLICE REVIEW:** Holden has said he will wait to see a consultant's report on the Columbia Police Department's internal procedures before deciding whether a citizen review board is necessary.

"If our city police department is doing an above average job investigating and handling police misconduct complaints, then I would not be in favor of a citizen review board being established," Holden said. However, if the report indicates that the police department is not appropriately investigating its officers, "then of course the review board makes much more sense for our community."

**INFRASTRUCTURE:** Infrastructure financing should be a priority for the city, Holden said. He mentioned pursuing joint public-private projects and other programs to "focus infrastructure funding in a critical area of need." He also said that the city should focus on engineering for growth where development already exists. Peripheral development, for example, has increased traffic on Scott Boulevard, a road Holden said has become his No. 1 priority for reconstruction.

If a resident does answer the door, Holden gives a quick introduction and leaves a flier. Occasionally, Holden will ask a resident if they have any concerns with the neighborhood.

"I'm surprised he didn't bring up the smoking ban," Holden laughed after meeting with a constituent wearing a black Cody's Saloon T-shirt. Instead, the two talked about the need for more sidewalks in the area, especially so children have a place to walk safely.

Although Holden gets along well with the people he meets while canvassing, some of his campaign tactics have given people pause.

Elda Kurzejeski, first vice president and voter service chairwoman for the League of Women Voters, called Holden's methods "adversarial, but informative" after her group's forum.

During his closing statement, Holden asked the audience to allow him to "highlight a difference" between him and his opponent, Jerry Wade. The two have a lot in common, including their current service on the Columbia Planning and Zoning Commission. Holden explained why he had cast a vote on the commission against a proposal for the new Wal-Mart on Broadway, then mentioned that Wade had voted for it.

"(Wade) was ready with his response," said Kurzejeski, adding that the differences between the candidates were "what we want and need to know."

Robert Tucker, who has lived in the Fourth Ward since 1999 and has Wade campaign signs in his yard, said after a recent meeting of West Broadway residents that some of Holden's tactics "took me a step back."

"This is the first time I've ever seen a race for the City Council that is so aggressive," Tucker said, reacting to a flier distributed to residents stating reasons why "Jerry Wade is wrong for Columbia."

"I'm more interested in what candidates can do for us," Tucker said. "This is City Council for crying out loud."

The flier mirrored Holden's Web site, which discusses the Wal-Mart issue and states that Wade "ignored citizen input" in voting for the Wal-Mart plan.

Holden emphasized that his campaign literature is only intended to point out differences.

"It's hard to find differences between the candidates," Holden said. "The advice I've been given is, where there are differences make sure people understand and hear them."

How will he react if people complain that his campaign is negative?

“I’m prepared for that,” he said. “I don’t think its negative to say Jerry voted this way and I voted this way. I’m not out to be negative or criticize Jerry in any way.”

Holden said the race is about showing Columbia residents that he has a lot to offer.

“Life experience is about what you have in your heart,” Holden said. “For me, my heart is Columbia.”