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By: [Ryan J. Stanton](#)

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Ann Arbor Mayor John Hieftje finds widespread support campaigning in opponent's neighborhood

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Ann Arbor Mayor John Hieftje found widespread support for his campaign in the neighborhood of his political opponent, Patricia Lesko, on Thursday.

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Ann Arbor Mayor [John Hieftje](#) stepped foot Thursday night into what, politically speaking, could be considered enemy territory: His opponent's neighborhood.

As he went door-to-door, Hieftje said it was his first time campaigning on [Patricia Lesko's](#) home turf, just off Pontiac Trail in a part of town known simply as Northside.

He spent more than an hour in the quiet cul-de-sac abutting [Black Pond Woods](#), and was greeted with handshakes and smiles from residents. Some shrieked with excitement upon seeing the mayor at their front doorstep.

"Hi! I know who you are!" one woman shouted when answering her door, even though she had never met Hieftje before.

"I'm just out talking to my bosses today and seeing if they have any questions or anything," was the mayor's standard response.

If the neighborhood he campaigned in Thursday at all represents of the rest of Ann Arbor, Hieftje appears to be generally well-liked by voters. But at least at some houses, the fact alone that Hieftje is up against Lesko was reason enough for some to say they support the incumbent.



"We live in the neighborhood with your competitor," said [Andy Poli](#), who welcomed the mayor into his home for a 15-minute chat. "It's probably unnecessary for you to spend your time here. You probably have a tremendous amount of support here in comparison to any other subsection, except maybe where you live."

Hieftje will face off in the Aug. 3 Democratic primary against Lesko, a

Hieftje speaks with residents in Patricia Lesko's neighborhood while campaigning on Thursday.

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formidable opponent who has heavily criticized him for months on her blog, [A2Politico.com](https://www.a2politico.com). At first, the attacks were [anonymous](#), but now Lesko openly dishes her critiques.

Lesko paints a picture of city government as dysfunctional, possibly corrupt, and says city officials make all the wrong choices while residents are left to suffer badly calculated budget cuts.

Hieftje tells a story of a city doing its best in hard times, remaining in better shape than most other cities across the hardscrabble state of Michigan, and still winning awards.

"I think it was Forbes that just named us the fourth most livable city," he told more than one resident during Thursday's outing.

Nearly all the voters Hieftje encountered said they were pleased with the direction the city is headed, and they'll be supporting him for another two years.

"We're happy with the city. Please don't change anything," said **Rick Severson**, a Seattle native who moved to Ann Arbor a little over 15 years ago. "We have had really good police service here. We love the police, the fire, everything is great. I love this place. I like the new (police-courts building). I mean, that actually looks cool. I drove by there the other day."



Hieftje speaks with Rick Severson outside his garage on Thursday.

AnnArbor.com [hit the campaign trail](#) with Lesko in May, going door-to-door in a neighborhood of her choosing. She selected a subdivision on the city's west side, where her message resonated with many voters.

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Hieftje's response Thursday also was positive. He had overwhelming support in Lesko's neighborhood, where not a single yard sign for the challenger stood.

"We could have gone to some neighborhood where I know that I have a whole lot of support — I've been running for office for a while," Hieftje said. "I thought it was really fair to go to a neighborhood where you would expect support for my opponent to be strong. She has lived there for a number of years."

Lesko acknowledged in an interview with AnnArbor.com that she has made some enemies over the years, including on the Northside PTO and other organizations in which she has been involved. That's fine by her, she said, she's not trying to win a popularity contest and sees herself being in the right in each situation.

"I take deadly seriously a commitment to a board. I take the legal and fiduciary responsibility deadly seriously," she said. "And I have served on boards with people who don't share that mindset, who don't share that professionalism."

Hieftje and Lesko trade more blows
[AnnArbor.com's debate coverage here](#)

Lesko told stories of serving on boards with people who "diverted funds from restricted accounts" and engaged in blatant racial discrimination. She said she has offended people by speaking out in those instances.

"And for that, I don't apologize," she said. "I can completely understand in some cases how it could make people uncomfortable because, heck, there's everybody saying, 'Let's do this,' and I'm sitting there going, 'Wait a minute, this board doesn't have any liability insurance, and you want to hide the fact that an employee stole money and the principal signed off on it?'"

"If there is a pattern, it is the pattern that I have been consistent in taking board positions very seriously and speaking out where I perceive people are behaving unprofessionally or unethically and it's hard," she said. "It makes people uncomfortable and it's something in me I've had since I was a kid. I don't know where it came from, but I've always been this way. And I feel like I'm not willing to compromise that. It's the same thing with being elected to this office."



Hieftje speaks with Carrie Throm and her daughter inside their home on Thursday.

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Despite dissenting opinions from his political opposition this election season, Hieftje said he's convinced most residents believe Ann Arbor is on the right track.

"That's certainly what we're hearing tonight and we're hearing some people who are saying they understand what's going on with cities in the state of Michigan," he said as he continued door-to-door.

Hieftje has been criticized by Lesko for what she considers "exponential increases" in water and sewer rates. Starting this month, water rates increased 3.88 percent, while sewer rates went up 3 percent and stormwater rates 2 percent.

Hieftje told residents the increases have helped build up money so the city can pay for necessary upgrades to the city's sewage treatment plant.

"Our sewage treatment plant, a whole section of it, was built in the 1930s with stimulus money during the Great Depression," he said. "It's sort of ironic that we're fixing it now again, but that's a \$140 million overall project when you combine it with some sewer mains and things like that. But we have been paying for that already and we already have quite a bit of that money — over half of it — assembled in the account so that we can move forward and get the work done."

Hieftje talked openly with residents about cuts to city services that are taking effect this month, including the layoff of three firefighters. Surprisingly, he received positive responses.

"I'm actually very supportive of what you're doing with the fire and police departments," said resident **Carol Poulos**. "I mean, I think cuts have to be made and I don't think that our town is unsafe in that way at all."

Hieftje also told residents that [fall leaf pickup](#) is going away this year. Due to efforts to trim the city's budget, residents must now bag their own leaves.

"We're actually happy about that," said **Carrie Throm**, who thinks it will reduce problems with vehicles parking over leaves, blocked bicycle lanes and clogged drains.

"I think you're doing a good job," **Dan Chapman** told Hieftje while chatting on his porch. "I'm really pretty pleased with the direction things are going and I know things have been tough, but my wife and I are pretty happy with things."

Chapman said given the hard economic times and the difficulties other cities are facing, he sees Ann Arbor as doing relatively well. And that's a message Hieftje consistently hammers on when he talks.

"All the cities are having a hard time," he told one resident. "Our revenue sharing, the money that comes to us from the state, is down almost \$4 million from where it was at its peak way back in 2002 or 2003, right around there. And we've just really this year suffered the loss of the bulk of the taxes from Pfizer."

During a long chat inside Andy Poli's home, Hieftje expressed optimism that federal funding will come through to build a new transit station on Fuller Road. Hieftje has been criticized because the station would be built on city parkland.

Hieftje said the federal government is throwing big money at high-speed rail, and the same improvements that make high-speed rail work would make possible the region's plans for a commuter rail service linking Ann Arbor and Detroit.

"They've just funded Dearborn with a \$30 million train station, and we are hoping they'll do the same at Fuller Road," he said. "And the university investment makes up pretty much the whole match for the federal money."

Hieftje also talked with Poli and his wife about parking fine increases implemented recently as part of the city's budget measures.

"If you get a parking ticket, pay it before the end of business the next business day because that went up," he warned them.

Single-stream recycling is another topic Hieftje stresses. He said the switch, though it will cost millions up front, eventually will save money.



Hieftje looks over a list of registered voters inside his truck.

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"I think you'll love single-stream," he told residents. "I was the chairman of the board of Recycle Ann Arbor in '89 and '90, and we always said back then that recycling will work best when it's just as easy to recycle as it is to throw something away. We'll continue to slow down on what's going in the landfill, which saves us money in the long-run, and the program's supposed to pay for itself in about seven years."

Ryan J. Stanton covers government and politics for AnnArbor.com. Reach him at ryanstanton@annarbor.com or 734-623-2529.

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