

## **Our interview with the municipal councillor Guy Weirich**

### **What do you like about your municipality and how have you experienced its development?**

I like Bertrange because of its convenient location. In the immediate vicinity, we find everything we need to meet our basic needs: food, clothing and healthcare. Our locality is a settlement that still lies somewhere between a village and a town in its development. I never knew the Bertrange that had a purely rural character; I only moved to Bertrange at the end of 1994. However, it has enabled exactly what I – following the philosopher Schopenhauer and his parable of the porcupines – consider very important: finding the appropriate distance from one another – close enough for the necessary human warmth, but not so close that we hurt each other with our “quills.” Human coexistence among people from often very different cultural backgrounds works quite well in Bertrange. Many associations, as well as the municipal government, the school and the church, all play an excellent role in this matter. The range of offerings is so broad that young people, middle-aged people, and older people can easily find their way to the desired “vivre ensemble.” Furthermore, now that I am older, I especially appreciate the well-designed walking paths. The development of the locality is characterized by many new residential areas and a growing population. Since I have been a member of the municipal council – that is, for nine years – the number of residents has increased by 2,000! This growth is reflected in the infrastructure of the school and the Maison Relais. However, I find some specific implementations quite unfortunate. Just one example: the schoolyard of the "Am Schlass" school. I never understood why such a huge staircase structure had to be added to that yard; the consequences of the lack of space have become increasingly apparent over the years. Overall, the spatial planning and the location selection for municipal buildings in the past cannot always be considered successful. A major challenge for our municipality is the development of Helfent. Looking toward the future, it is important to expand the park in Helfent to the Route du 9 Septembre 1944 and to secure a green, attractive oasis in Bertrange for future generations. After all, no one knows what the country's spatial planning will look like in 50 years.

### **Bertrange has a history and a cultural heritage that few people know. Can you tell us a bit about it?**

Gladly. Historical research traces the origins of our locality back to Gallo-Roman times. The name Bertrange comes from the Franks. Knights and noble families have left their mark. During sieges of the fortress of Luxembourg, Bertrange was regularly looted and burned. Insights can also be gained from the history of the parish. Witnesses of this history include the Schauwenburg and the church of St. Peter and Paul. I recommend the publication by our “Geschichtsfrënn” entitled “*Bertrange. Ma commune. L'essentiel sur la géographie, l'histoire et la culture*”, which can be obtained at the municipal office. It presents our cultural heritage from a wide range of perspectives and includes, for example, sports, nature, and industrial development. I especially recommend a visit to our parish church, which is not only an architectural gem but also features several works of art, such as the modern Stations of the Cross by the artist Bettina Scholl-Sabbatini. A second recommendation: Take a walk specifically to discover the artworks located at various places throughout our municipality. A small guidebook with explanations about these works would be very desirable and helpful. Upon inquiry, our *service culturel* informed me that such a guide is in the works but likely won't be published until next year.

### **What are the best-kept secrets of Bertrange?**

Secrets, taboos, from today or the past? That question is a bit too much for me. You'd probably have to ask those whose families have lived in Bertrange for a long time. Skeletons in the political closet? Maybe ... I have no idea. But my main interest doesn't lie in local political archaeology. I don't dig around in that. I already have enough to dig through in my own personal garden.

### **What is important to you during municipal council meetings?**

Just as I always tried to prepare my high school lessons as thoroughly as possible, it's self-evident to me to go through the dossiers before a council meeting. It's also important that we discuss things in our faction beforehand, divide up interventions, and decide how we will vote. During the meeting itself, I aim for what is written on the first page of my personal folder. The first is a satirical reminder by Karl Kraus about never-ending speeches: "Everything has already been said, but not yet by everyone." The second is advice from Ignatius of Loyola: "In controversial matters, one should seek to save the arguments of those who think differently rather than condemn them – in other words, to ask whether the opponents might see something that we ourselves are blind to, due to our own approach, value system, or the complexity of reality." I am convinced that constructive cooperation in the interest of the common good is possible. That's why we do not engage in fundamental opposition but rather in critical and constructive opposition. Looking ahead – now that the opposition is numerically smaller due to the new coalition and we are being challenged more – our motto is: fair, but tough on the issues. The CSV will hold the coalition partners to their promises, provide input, and also inform citizens about what the coalition would rather not talk about. As before, we have an open ear for people's concerns and will bring their worries and wishes into the debate.

### **As an opposition politician, you've surely had to endure some frustrations.**

Frustration certainly exists, but it can also be a motivator! There are three levels of frustration. First: I find it difficult to accept when points listed in an election program and the *Schöfferrat's* statement of intent suddenly no longer apply. Examples: the medical center (*Maison médicale*), municipal workshops! Second: It saddens me when legitimate suggestions and questions from committed citizens are ignored, rejected, or result in no action for a long time. That's what truly makes me sad. For instance, there's a playground that has been officially closed for years. You can't just say, "We're working on a master plan for all playgrounds." That's fine in principle, but in the short term, you still need to make one specific playground usable again. In this context, I'd like to refer to our municipal app, where you can report elements of the public space that need repair, replacement, improvement, or fixing via "Report-it!" In my experience, the responsible departments respond fairly quickly to incidents reported through the app (e.g., illegally dumped garbage, signs thrown into the Petrusse). Unfortunately, I also occasionally hear from people who are frustrated because their phone complaints were brushed off. Third: the rejection of our proposals. However, this also shows that persistence and well-founded suggestions can have an impact and win over a majority. Those who govern have an interest in adopting and implementing good ideas from others. Good governance means acting in the interest of all people – not just one's own electorate.

### **What positive experiences have you had?**

For me personally, without a doubt, it was the time when I was responsible for part of the cultural sector and the music school. I had a good working relationship with Mayor Frank Colabianchi. He was absolutely reliable – his word counted. Together, we implemented several small projects for the benefit of the community, such as renewing the Spierzelter Weg and the small bridge at ArcA. One

of my best initiatives was the successful implementation of a Festival of Young Talents (*Bayota*). Although we were slowed down by the coronavirus crisis, the project proved worthwhile and has been continued by the new cultural commission. My push for greater professionalization of the cultural department helped move our cultural policy forward. However, greater diversification is still pending: in addition to musical arts, much more needs to be done in other fields of art. For this, the CSV has proposed concrete and ambitious projects that could be developed step by step. It's not acceptable to fob off interested people with the claim that there are enough offerings elsewhere in Luxembourg and that young people can develop their talents there.

**How do you assess our municipality's subsidy policy in the field of renewable energy?**

At the moment, our municipality adds an extra 25% to the subsidies granted by the state – although this is capped at a certain maximum amount. The relevant regulation can be viewed on the municipality's website. Some other municipalities have increased this percentage to 50%, and at least one municipality already offers 70%. So, there is still room for improvement. It's possible that the Greens, who now have a representative on the council of aldermen (*Schöfferrat*), will push for an increase. We will certainly support that. But subsidy policy is only one aspect of climate protection. As the CSV, we've been advocating for years that we participate in the technical development of energy storage. In addition to our solar park, it would make sense to install solar thermal collectors for hot water generation on municipal buildings where it is feasible and effective – for example, on the sports halls. Another idea we should consider: just as the municipality supplies some residents with heat from the CHP plant, households with photovoltaic systems could, in turn, supply electricity to the municipality. The municipality could buy the surplus electricity produced by these households. Given the challenges we face today, the goal must be: energy autonomy for the municipality through cooperative action. That's why we have also proposed establishing a Center for Ecology and Solidarity.

**What would that look like in practice? Another center? The CSV has also proposed the idea of an art school.**

Yes! Is it wrong to come up with ideas and push for their implementation? Step by step!

**Still, you already encountered resistance in the municipal council regarding the art school.**

Indeed. The president of the cultural commission strongly opposed the idea of an art school. According to her, interested individuals – children, youth, and adults – already have enough opportunities in Luxembourg to develop their talents. I, however, believe that we in Bertrange should promote other forms of art besides music. By the way, there was also support in the municipal council for the idea of an art school. And most importantly: the topic was discussed; it reached the council. That's already a first success. Ideas from the opposition are not automatically successful, but good ideas will prevail in the long run.

**You said “step by step”!**

Yes. For all our projects, I follow the method of gradual, planned development – starting a project and then gradually expanding it in small steps. Things won't be implemented all at once. Every project requires financial resources. Additionally, it makes sense to gain experience and incorporate that into the project's further development. Another requirement – whether it's a *Maison médicale*, an art school, or an ecological-social center – is a good location that allows for future expansion. Let me come back to Helfent Park. Improvements have already been made there over time. Now the next step should be to expand that park.

**Another topic: How do you assess the municipality's communication policy?**

There's no doubt that a lot has been invested in communication. There are many positives: a diverse website, an app, electronic display boards, the "Enjoy Bertrange" project, flyers in mailboxes, advertising banners, radio and bus ads, brochures, detailed reports on council meetings (though lately, some citizens have criticized the "enormous paper consumption"), and finally, public meetings where projects are presented and citizen suggestions are occasionally taken up. However, I sometimes hear that citizens' ideas are not taken into account at all. Today, effective communication requires multiple, diverse channels to reach as many people as possible. For larger projects, it would be sensible to keep people informed more regularly and over a longer period. For example, before the last municipal elections, the project for a new care home for the elderly was presented with great effort at the Centre Atert. At the time, some residents even asked if they could already register. Now, two years later, it would be appropriate to inform the public about the current status of this project. People need to be included; we need to explain and show how such a project develops or what difficulties it encounters. Instead, there's silence. But participation is a vital part of democracy. Another example: two years ago, the entire opposition proposed live streaming the council meetings. The political majority raised many objections. It took two years until the mayor finally announced streaming would begin in December 2025! Incidentally, I believe that many residents possess valuable practical expertise. People often tell me they make suggestions, give advice, point out problems or grievances. But they also say they are not taken seriously and that some politicians are resistant to advice.

**Do you think our municipality is open to the outside world and contributes sufficiently to the common good? Bertrange is considered a wealthy municipality in a wealthy country. But how open is it to others? Is it a municipality that promotes the common good beyond its own borders? Is what it's doing in this area enough?**

There is consensus in the municipal council that we should look beyond our own backyard. This has never been a matter of contention. Bertrange supports organizations that are socially active both within Luxembourg and internationally. It also regularly provides disaster relief. Our partnerships with Santa Maria Nuova (Italy), Wallerfangen (Germany), and Serfaus (Austria) help bring people in Europe closer together. Especially in a time when some countries are becoming more self-centered and focused on making their own nations "great" again, it's important to strengthen European solidarity among people. Of course, we must consider which of these areas could reasonably be expanded. For instance, the partnerships could involve more participation from the broader population. Just a side note: every municipality that pursues ecological projects is contributing to the fight against climate change – and is thereby acting in cooperation with others for the benefit of all!

**One last specific question: How do you view the expansion of rat control in Bertrange?**

Rats in the sewer system are regularly controlled using poisoned bait. If they become a nuisance in gardens, on the edge of town, or elsewhere in the village, I am convinced that the municipal administration is the right contact point and will take appropriate countermeasures. Rat control outside the sewage system certainly serves the public good, as this is a matter of public hygiene.

**Thank you for this very detailed conversation!**