

For Coalition for a Better Memphis

Candidate: Memphis Mayor A C Wharton Jr.

Citizens for Better Memphis Questionnaire

1a. Please describe your background and your qualifications for this position. What experiences caused you to run for this office. What previous experience qualifies you more than your opponents to lead on Day 1?

My experience as the mayor of Memphis and previously as the mayor of Shelby County uniquely prepares me to lead City of Memphis government and gives me an intimate knowledge of government in all its complexities, from policy to budget, from citizen engagement to more efficient government, from personnel management to strategic planning. I have shown that I know how to make government more efficient, to give more people a voice in the affairs of government, and to identify the issues that matter most to Memphis' future. I haven't learned about these issues just from reading charts and graphs and reading white papers. I learned about them in the best way possible: by going into every neighborhood in this city and talking with people from all walks of life, in boardrooms and living rooms, about their needs, their challenges, and their dreams. From my experience, my knowledge of government, my part in national conversations about cities, and my discussions with countless Memphians, I have developed a clear vision for our city and have created an agenda to achieve it.

1b. What previous experience do you have running a business, managing employees or controlling a budget?

As mayor of Memphis, I am CEO for one of the largest enterprises and employers in our community, and prior to this, I was CEO for one of the largest county governments in the Southeast.

1c. Beginning with your most recent position, please lists all public offices you have held. Please include positions on appointed boards or commissions.

Mayor of Memphis – 2009 to present

Mayor of Shelby County – 2002 to 2009

1d. If you have previously run for elected office but were not elected, please list those races below.

Shelby County District Attorney General – 1982

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2a. What is your vision for the City? How would you use this office to achieve the vision?

You've heard me talk a great deal about choice as mayor, and that lies at the heart of my vision. My vision is for every Memphian to have options for their lives – to work at good-paying jobs, to live in safe and attractive neighborhoods, to enjoy a special quality of life, and to be a proud ambassador for our city. To achieve this vision, I have acted on a comprehensive agenda to move Memphis ahead and our success has already attracted national attention and praise. But we're just beginning.

2c. What issues do you believe will shape the City over the next few years?

Our city's traditional income disparity is ice on our economic wings, and in the wake of the recession, we have an even greater gap between the earnings and wealth of our black and white citizens. Connected to that is the problem that we have too many people who are unemployed and even more who are underemployed. That's why our successful recruitments of companies like Electrolux and Mitsubishi are so important. There is the issue of universal quality education for every child and the need to focus more on early childhood education from birth to three years of age when a child's brain grows to 80% of its adult size. Then we have to continue our dramatic reductions in crime to send a message to potential investors and companies that Memphis is a great and safe place to do business. In Memphis, like every large city, everything is connected so we have to do many things right at the same time, but the interlocking relationships between workforce, jobs, talent, and public safety are paramount.

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3. How do you plan on insuring that there is diversity (including race, age, gender, and socio-economic) represented in the development of public policy, staffing, and appointments, and city contracting?

There is only one way to ensure it: with intentionality every day and with every decision. It's more than stating values about fairness. It's about reaching out like I did at MPACT in early August to ask more young people – of all races, genders, and sexual orientation – to volunteer to serve on a city board or commission. As county mayor, I emailed notices of board openings to a broad range of people who signed up to the notified, but especially young Memphians. At MPACT, we had an overflow crowd and we have dozens of great resumes to consider for appointment as a result of reaching out. In other words, it's not enough to preach diversity. You have to lead by example, and I have done that in city government. As for city contracting, we have specific goals for diversity in every contract that have to be met, and we are encouraging companies that do business with city government to use the same diverse workers for their non-government work. Shortly, I will announce a new umbrella organization that will act as a portal for any minority-owned business that wants to do business with City of Memphis, and it will streamline the process, it will give advice and technical assistance, and most of all, it will get companies qualified to do business with city government.

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4. What role should the City of Memphis government play in promoting the economic development for the community? What specific initiatives or actions would you promote and/or support regarding both large and small businesses?

No issue has gotten more attention from me in recent years than economic development. It's a rare day that I am not recruiting new business, talking to a large business, visiting with a small business, or working on issues like workforce development that is a driver for economic opportunity. I have taken action on all fronts, such as hiring Desi Franklin to correct problems at Workforce Investment Network and to make sure our workers have their best chance to train for existing jobs and jobs of the future. In addition, to jump start our economic growth, I added \$5 million to the city budget last year which was used to leverage key projects that could not have happened otherwise, such as keeping Pinnacle Airlines from moving out of state and protecting the skyline of Memphis by moving them to One Commerce Square. I am most proud that existing businesses have created more than 10,000 new jobs since I took office as mayor because of the new confidence about the future of their city. Also, I've concentrated on entrepreneurship, particularly minority startups, and we'll soon announce a new innovative program to make that happen. We've increased accountability for and reporting on minority participation on city contracts by department, and I led the creation of EDGE to eliminate the silos and increase effectiveness by putting all public agencies working on economic development in one umbrella organization. Finally, we have ended the years of isolation for City of Memphis, and for the first time, city government is directly and integrally involved in important national discussions about urban areas. That involvement has already led to the decision by the Brookings Institution to select Memphis as one of three cities in which to develop a Metropolitan Business Plan, by the Bloomberg Philanthropies to select Memphis as one of five cities for innovation grants, and the Obama White House to select Memphis as one of six cities for its "Strong Cities, Strong Communities" program. All of these will converge and align to create more economic momentum for Memphis as we recover from the recession. For example, with the "Strong Cities" program, we will be able to work with federal agencies to respond directly to our needs rather than contorting ourselves to conform to their normal bureaucratic requirements.

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5. How would you strengthen and support existing neighborhoods that are within the city of Memphis and what barriers to community redevelopment do you see in these areas? How do you propose to address the neighborhood blight in a proactive manner?

Neighborhood blight is the #1 complaint for Memphians calling the Citizens Service Center. Our people recognize the seriousness of this problem and so does my administration. Blight undermines a neighborhood's work to help itself, it sends the message that our neighborhoods are not important, it becomes a magnet for crime, and it blocks the creation of new jobs that are neighborhood-based. That's why I have launched work on several fronts. City government has engaged a special attorney to attack 500 blighted properties a year through civil litigation. He'll use the law we worked to change to give us this court option and we successfully tested the effectiveness of this approach in the medical district. I fought for our neighborhoods by filing a lawsuit against Wells-Fargo for the predatory lending which adversely affected inner city neighborhoods. It was my concern that led to the "Memphis Makeover" report to address blight, litter, and weeds in our neighborhoods. It's in the process of being implemented. It will merge functions to make them more efficient and it will create a 311 system so that our citizens don't have to find their way through city government to find help. Also, we are partners in the new Community LIFT program that is executing the first comprehensive neighborhood plan for Memphis, and we are also continuing our HOPE VI projects to strengthen our neighborhoods. Because of the recession and foreclosures, our neighborhoods need concerted help and we need the entire community to come together to make them a priority. If a tornado struck Memphis and devastated neighborhoods, we would all join hands to help. In fact, a tornado has hit our neighborhoods as a result of foreclosures and the recession, and to deal with the problems, we need the faith community, the public sector, the private sector, nonprofit organizations, and philanthropy to join us to work a clear plan of action. Doing nothing is not an option. We have to create an eco-system to support, strengthen, and protect our neighborhoods, and that's our ultimate goal.

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6. Discuss the current administrative structure and do you have a vision for altering this structure? How would you strengthen a culture of accountability and outcome based on performance standards for division of city government as well as appointed positions?

As soon as I took the oath of office as mayor, I convened a group of knowledgeable people to advise me during the transition, and one of the crucial questions they examined was the structure of city government and ways to make it more efficient. To follow it up, I appointed a special Strategic Business Assessment Committee to drill deeper and give me executable actions that could be taken to cut costs, serve citizens better, and increase accountability. Many of these recommendations have been implemented and many more are in the process. Successful governments are always in a state of becoming. We can never think we are through with our work to create a customer service culture driving a clear vision for Memphis. That's why we will have the first phase of a multi-phase 311 system operational by December. 311 is more than a call center. More to the point, it is a center of business intelligence which is missing in city government. We need data and standards to make decisions about priorities, about budgeting, about measuring which departments are effective. In the end, 311 is a vehicle to improve government but it is a part of an overall performance management and measurement system that will drive changes to the structure and improvements to services. Best of all, it will break down silos and align city services to better respond to needs from the public, whether it is blight, housing problems, potholes, and more. Presently, we are considering structural ways to align services that deal with grass-cutting, blight, and litter, and our plans will be announced before the end of the year. It's always important in a quality process to be constantly evaluating and reevaluating, and that includes changes to a city government structure that was created at the time that color television was put on the market and must now operate effectively in the digital age. And yet, performance standards mean little if they are not easily provided to and accessed by the public. The 311 system and a performance measurement system will arm city government with detailed information about performance and accountability for the first time, and with it, we will develop the "Memphis Dashboard." It will not only provide a daily graphic snapshot of the performance by city departments that will show up on the screens of every city computer to tie performance to our vision for City of Memphis and to our agenda for progress, but it will be posted to the city website so every Memphian can hold their city government accountable. There are models that we are evaluating like the Atlanta Dashboard by former Mayor Shirley Franklin and the Greater Louisville Project, and we will have more details about this breakthrough program that puts accountability not only in the hands of city managers but our citizens.

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7. How can the mayor effectively contribute to the reduction of the crime rate in the City of Memphis? What current strategies would you continue to support and what changes would you propose?

First and foremost, the Memphis mayor articulates a vision that is integrated into the vision and work of the police department and communicates it to the public. It's a message that city government is intolerant of crime and that we will root out the small percentage of the people who are responsible for a large percentage of the problem. Public safety is intertwined with business development and neighborhood development, because feelings of safety are key to development. For example, we can't recruit a major distribution center if we are known for problems with cargo theft. We are going into the neighborhood and asking their help and asking what their needs and problem areas are so we can tailor our programs to them. We are refining all aspects of Blue Crush to target hot spots and trouble spots, but if we are to reduce crime as dramatically as we have in recent years, we have to attack its causes. Because of that, we are targeting juveniles who are at-risk and developing a program to give them alternatives to their entry into the juvenile justice system. We are serious about identifying the most science-based and data-based programs to focus on prevention, but at the same time, give young people better choices in their lives. Finally, we are working on reentry programs for the 3,000 ex-felons who return to Memphis every year. We have to create training programs to qualify them for jobs so they can support their families but we also have to encourage companies to give deserving men and women a second chance to prove they can contribute productively to society.

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8. Are you familiar with the current budget and what are your major budget priorities?

The top priorities are public safety and creation of new jobs. We have to make improvements to the airport which is the largest economic driver in the entire state. We have to focus on aligning our rail, road, and airport assets, because they are world-class and authentic to Memphis and our economic future. We will create an infrastructure bank for business expansion as another tool so we are not overly dependent on tax freezes. We have to make investments that improve the quality of place that is critical to economic growth in the new economy. We have to control the debt of city government, and because of my experience as county mayor, I know how to make that happen. Already, I have instituted a modified pay-as-you-go policy for new capital improvement projects. In other words, successful cities have to do a lot of things right at the same time, but chief among them is to make sure that every tax dollar is wisely spent and that the city's priorities are mirrored in the priorities of the budget.

9. Would you be willing to submit to a background check and allow the results to be published?

Of course.