

Coalition for a Better Memphis Candidate Questionnaire Memphis City Council

Edmund Ford Jr. – District 6

1. Please describe your background and your qualifications for this position? What experiences caused you to run for this office? What unique qualities would you bring to this position and what differentiates you from other candidates in your race?

To start, I am a proud product of the Memphis City Schools, graduating from Central High School in the top 7% of my class at the age of sixteen. I pursued my undergraduate work at Tennessee State University where I graduate cum laude with a B.S. in Mathematics with a minor in Computer Science. The following year, I received my M.S. in Mathematical Sciences with an emphasis in Technology. During that time I had several leadership roles in Student Government, where one of my accomplishments was to add more computer lab facilities to both campuses. When I arrived, there was one lab with 50 computers to facilitate 7,500 students. When I left, there were over 30 labs located in each dormitory and departmental building. This strive got me my first full-time job at the school as Academic Lab Specialist at the age of 20, where I was responsible for the maintenance of each computer lab and the payroll of 60 student employees. Each year during my three year stint, I always worked under budget within 3-5%.

After performing 2 years of PhD study at Vanderbilt University in the area of Leadership and Policy Studies, it was in 2004 that I decided I wanted to run for Memphis City Council. Knowing how important it was to know the mechanics of legislative government, I traveled back and forth from Nashville to Memphis every 1st and 3rd Tuesday for 3 years to attend the meetings. I was able to learn government and create rapport with a diverse group of City administrators while in attendance. This same work ethic has followed me in office, where I currently have perfect attendance.

Three qualities that differentiate me from other candidates are (1) my work ethic, (2) my ability to work with others, and (3) my ability to calculate ways to generate revenues for the City. To give you more insight on these three qualities, I'll highlight some of the things I've done. During my 4 years at Central High School, my students' scores on the Tennessee End-of-Course exams have been the highest at the school 3 out of the last 4 years and always higher than state standards. Because of their success and recognizing the

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need to foster the quality education of our children, I started a 501(c)(3) organization that incentivizes student achievement in Algebra. Legislatively, several of my proposals I bring to the full Council are welcomed open-mindedly and objectively. None of the votes on my proposals has been met with extreme polarity. For example, during this fiscal year's budget meetings, I was able to compile a list of controlled, cost-recovering, revenue generators. A diverse group of Council members voted for 5 of my 6 proposals, which will generate over \$10 million in our general fund annually.

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

Proverbs 29:18 is one of my favorite scriptures. It states, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." Conversely, this means where there is a vision, the people live. From a spiritual and socioeconomic perspective, this is very true because Memphis should be the place where people will desire to live, work, and play.

My vision for Memphis is for the city to once again be the high elite in public safety, quality education, and economic development. All three categories are interrelated. In order for us to be considered regionally, nationally, and globally as the "leader" and not the "follower", it takes high-quality leadership from the Mayor and his administration to the City Council to work collaboratively in pursuing and achieving goals and objectives that enhance the quality of life of all.

First of all, I would want all neighborhoods to be safe, clean, and attractive to the eye. In order for this to occur, cooperative growth is needed. Cooperative growth must be done threefold: culturally, communally, and economically. It is extremely easy to negatively criticize Memphis' challenges in this area, but it takes a lot of time and energy to actually stay in the City and look for ways in making it better. I'm a strong proponent in finding proactive ways in removing these barriers and have actively helped neighborhoods with this specific goal.

Public education cannot be inadequately administered to our youth. No matter what we may perceive about the younger generation, the fact is that the next generation will indeed be our future doctors, lawyers, entrepreneurs, and other positive contributors to society. A City that embodies and impels successful schools will be able to attract and retain young people. Moreover, this will have a progressive impact on the middle class sector of the City, which has much room for increment. This population increase should be coupled with continuous job growth. We must also increase graduation rates and decrease dropout rates and the number of schools on low-performing lists. I take pride as a teacher in making sure my students, regardless of their school status, have the best quality education at Central High School.

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Finally, in order to be the City of Choice, economic development will help fight the economic segregation and poverty that exists within the City. My vision is that we continue to dispel the existence of public housing and replace it with affordable housing. As mentioned in paragraph 3, I would like to see all sectors of a community empower themselves by collaborating and finding solutions to create the Memphis I believe we all want. I discuss this more when describing the SoMe project in question 6.

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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 and government?

Currently, I have had the privilege to serve 4 years on the Personnel, Intergovernmental, and Annexation Committee on the City Council, where we consider and approve appointments to various Boards and Commissions. When each nominee is considered, the committee is able to view the person's race, age, and gender where we can compare it to other sitting members on that respective board, ensuring diversity. I have taken the extra initiative to encourage community leaders around the City to serve on these boards.

I have been successful; however, the anxiety still remains for some who wish to serve because of their belief that "ordinary people" cannot serve in a significant capacity. In my opinion, everyone has something to bring to the table, notwithstanding their demographic or socio-economic status. The Mayor has done a good job with the incorporation of non-traditional people on his subcommittees and ad hoc committee, which are always rich in diversity and culture.

Finally, to enhance the development of public policy and government, I have continued to make myself accessible to all sectors of our City, not just my District. I have continuously invited community groups and neighborhood associations to Council meeting to engage us in questions and concerns. To illustrate that age is a non-factor in my invitation selection, I have invited the Boy Scouts and our school children to City Hall several times. Not only is this a great learning experience for our youth, but it illustrates transparency and the highly finite possibilities that they can encompass when they become positive contributors to our society.

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4. What are the three greatest issues facing the City of Memphis today?

(1) Education and its negative effect on the local workforce

(2) High poverty level and the ever-decreasing middle-class

(3) Finding new sources of revenue that minimally affect the Memphis taxpayer and sustain the quality of City services

These issues are described in further detail in several of the questions on the CBM questionnaire.

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5. 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?

As mentioned in question 2, public safety, quality education, and economic development are interrelated. This means that economic development promotion must be coalesced with safety and education promotion. After this has been established, then we can take a closer look at the community and its respective neighborhoods.

Memphis is competing on the global stage. Memphis is challenged not only by Mississippi and Arkansas when attracting jobs and industry, but also with other states and countries. Businesses are attracted to safe, stable, and viable neighborhoods. As a current Councilman, I know how important the relationship between government and the business community must be. Transparency and trust are of paramount importance. Additionally, when industry comes to Memphis, it should significantly benefit Memphians and not just the developer. For example, our local PILOT (Payment-in-Lieu-of-Taxes) program incentivizes businesses to make Memphis their commercial home; however, this should not be the only vehicle that creates brings job to the City. I would urge that the Council continue to work with the Mayor and his legislative liaison to lobby the State legislature to add to our incentive package that we present to prospective businesses.

Moreover, City government should maintain its relationship with the Memphis Regional Chamber and Memphis Fast Forward. These relationships will help create environments for small businesses, local businesses, and minority businesses. This is compulsory in order to create local tax bases which re-create middle class environments and enhance lower SES environments. I support preserving these types of businesses and removing any barriers possible so they can grow.

I fully support Mayors Wharton and Luttrell in the joint initiative, the Economic Development Growth Engine (EDGE), which will help retain and recruit business and I support initiatives that promote the public/private partnership. To give an example in the District 6 area, the Gemstones Community (Ruby Estates, Diamond Estates, and Emerald Estates) was a Hope VI public/private partnership that focused on the redevelopment of Holmes Road west of Horn Lake Road. It has been highly successful here and in other areas of the City, promoting economic development.

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6. How would you strengthen and support existing neighborhoods that are within the urban core and what barriers to community redevelopment do you see in these areas today? How do you propose to address the current blight in many of these areas?

Some of this was highlighted in the answer to question 5, but I will elaborate more here. In order to support and strengthen existing urban neighborhoods, infrastructure and fiscal resources must be accessible. Secondly, the Mayor and the Council must promote city-wide development, not leaving out areas that have been affected by blight or flight. Thirdly, economic development should be neighborhood-based, with community leaders and public/private entities working collaboratively to redevelop the areas with the urban core. I applaud the 38106 Collaboration in focusing on the current blight by having annual meetings and correspondence that includes City/County Code Enforcement, the Health Department, MPD, and the Sherriff's Office. It has produced communal dividends.

During my time on the Council, I have given continuous support and assistance to several Community Development Corporations (CDCs), including the Cooper-Young CDC and The Works, Inc. The latter has helped with the implementation and approval of the SoMe project (South Memphis Revitalization Action Plan), which is a 7 year longitudinal plan... "To transform South Memphis into one of our region's premier urban neighborhoods of choice by mobilizing local residents, institutions, and their allies to implement a comprehensive economic and community development strategy promoting healthy living, lifelong-learning, local entrepreneurship, job training, innovative youth and family services, green building and design, cooperative problem-solving, alternative transportation, excellence in urban design and public and private development partnerships."

I applaud the work that CDCs incorporate into their vision, but I also know of the fiscal shortcomings that they face. I have been a strong proponent in finding financial avenues to assist these organizations. I also support other neighborhoods that don't have CDCs to learn the process in order to start other CDCs in urban areas of similar need.

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7. What do you regard as the greatest obstacle or barrier to growth in the City today?

The greatest obstacle I see that has inhibited growth in Memphis is the historic polarization of the community, which has affected us socially and economically. This can be illustrated through the geographic splits, social cleavages, and racial divisions that continue to plague the city. However, polarization can be alleviated as a barrier when you have elected leaders that possess good, strong leadership and have the trust of the people. These leaders acknowledge that Memphis is a diverse city with several cultures, races, religions, and philosophies that make us unique. They also focus on the quality of life for all and common goal of achieving a better Memphis. Finally, these leaders are able to answer the difficult questions with solutions that alleviate local issues like polarization but other indirect issues like blight, crime, job creation, lack of revenue, and our high tax rate.

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8. What is the role of the City Council? What do you think about the relationship between the Council and the City Mayor; as well as other elected or appointed bodies, such as: Shelby County Commissioners, State of Tennessee Shelby County Delegation, MLGW, Greater Memphis Chamber, Downtown Memphis Commission, etc.?

The City Council has several roles, written and unwritten. It is the local legislative body of the City that sets the property tax rate and approves the Capital Improvement Project (CIP) and operating budgets. The City Council also approves the Memphis City Schools operating budget as well. Moreover, the Council considers and approves appointments to the City's Boards and Commissions, considers and approves zoning requests, and passes resolutions and ordinances. Being one branch of the local government, the City Council can play the role of the check and balance to the Mayor and his administration. Indirectly, the City Council is the voice of the individual Districts each member represents as well as for the whole. I consider myself a voice for all constituents, not just for District 6.

It is important to establish strong, trustworthy relationships with the Mayor as well as all of the aforementioned elected/appointed bodies. The Council and the Mayor are the primary promoters of the City, and I can personally say that I have a great rapport with the Mayor. We can agree to disagree, but the robust relationship still exists. One area that I can point to where the Mayor and I worked impressively was finding over \$13 million in cost-recovery revenue that he incorporated in his 2011-12 operating budget. The Council approved \$10 million of the proposals. This line of communication should be emulated with all other entities encompassed within our great City.

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9. With regard to the crime rate, what current strategies would you support and what changes would you propose if any?

First, I commend the steps that the Council took in order to add more police officers to our previously low complement. During my tenure, over 400 officers have been added. Secondly, we must continue to work on our crime rate. Notwithstanding the fact that overall crime has decreased significantly, the job is not over yet. The recent event of “4 people dead in 14 hours” should alarm us of that fact. Additionally, the burglary rate has continued to increase.

I support more neighborhood-oriented organizations like Operation Safe Community to continue to work hard on the crime issue. I also support the implementation of neighborhood-oriented watch groups and Co-Act units that can assist neighborhood associations. Public safety is of paramount importance, and short/long-term strategies should continue to be implemented to warrant security among all and discipline those who want to hinder our rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Short-term goals should include passing more legislation that enforces stronger penalties for those that commit violent crimes, increasing the presence of law enforcement officers in high crime areas, and establishing policies where officers are meeting the needs of the individual and diverse areas they protect. Long-term goals should include maintaining a high retention/recruitment rate of the police force via incentives such as professional development and marketable salaries and re-establishing the trust of the community in the police force.

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

In the light of recent events locally, regionally, and nationally, I am more than willing to submit to a background check as well as a drug test and having the results published. The public has the right to know any relevant information regarding the candidate's credibility and integrity. Moreover, as a proud employee of Memphis City Schools, I found it responsible and necessary to submit to both a background check and drug test before being hired to teach children. These measures preserve, and in some cases, help restore the confidence of constituents and communities.

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11. Do you support the local ethics ordinance? Is the Ordinance sufficient, and if not, what changes would you recommend?

I fully support the local ethics ordinance and the work that the Ethics officer and the Board do to provide the do's and don'ts of elected officials. When the ordinance was passed in 2007, the ethics ordinances for Tennessee and Memphis got much needed attention. I am glad the ordinances were amended to provide more specific and sufficient policies for all public officials. The Memphis City Council Ethics Ordinance, in particular, is a very strong and sufficient policy that is tougher than the previous ordinance. It is more detailed in what a public official can and cannot do while in office. It also carries stricter violations on those who perform unethical acts. I would not make any significant changes; however, I would continue to urge the Board to make fairness, trust, and transparency high goals when making future amendments.

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12. What are your ideas with regards to the City's responsibility for funding Memphis City Schools?

This is a very delicate question for me, especially since I am employed by the aforementioned entity. For ethical reasons, I always recuse myself from any votes that deal with the funding of Memphis City Schools. However, I do have ideas with regards to the City's responsibility for funding MCS.

I have always been a proponent for all public education in the County (MCS and SCS) to be funded through single-source funding, making the tax burden on Memphians more equitable. The inequity currently exists. Memphians are paying more than once for school funding via County property tax, City property tax, and the \$50 wheel tax on vehicle tags.

Although state law affirms that the County government is responsible for funding schools, it does not give the City government any legal mechanism to oversee how taxpayer money shall be spent in the school system. This is the challenge I have seen among Council members who would not mind funding the MCS system if there was a "check-and-balances" in place to qualify and quantify how taxpayer money is being specifically allocated. State and federal governments are always meticulous in this area; I see the Council wanting to follow suit. The current quandary we have is within our state law; hopefully the courts can alleviate some of the obscurity. Notwithstanding the funding issue, I do not believe an influx of money will cure all of the MCS issues such as the dropout rate and the list of schools on the low-performing list.

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13. What are the Council's responsibilities for making the City contract bidding process more equitable and transparent?

I have parts of a full presentation that I would like to show the body concerning this particular matter. It includes the process and how we can promote transparency and diversity in the City's bidding process. I will present this at the interview.