

Coalition for a Better Memphis Candidate Questionnaire Memphis City Council

James Sdoia – Dist. 9 Pos. 2

- 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?**

I was born and raised in Rochester, NY. My father was a letter carrier and my grandparents had all immigrated to the US from Italy. We lived a fairly typical middle-class life. My dad was a high school graduate who wanted his children to go to college. Education was emphasized in our house. I attended our parish grade school and spent my high school years at Aquinas Institute, an all-boys Catholic high school. From there I went to Georgetown University.

I graduated from Georgetown on a Sunday and married my childhood sweetheart, Noreen Lee Evanko, on Saturday of the same week. We began our family life in Northern Virginia and I began my business career in the field of banking technology. That career took our family from Falls Church, VA to Marietta, GA, to Little Rock, AR and finally Singapore. Our family returned to Little Rock in 1996. In early 1997 I made a career shift to the aviation industry and moved to the Memphis area. We have now lived longer in Memphis than in any other city. In 2007, I was able to retire while still in my 50's. Following retirement, my wife and I made the decision to remain in Memphis. We consider Memphis our home.

I have the advantage of having lived in multiple locations in the 35 years of my successful business career, which includes over 5 years living and working in the Far East. That means I have first-hand knowledge of how other cities and municipalities have dealt with civic issues and can draw on that experience to implement best practices in Memphis. I will probably be the only council person with first-hand international business experience, which is a must in today's global economy. I have a demonstrated ability to work successfully in challenging assignments. I know how to readily adapt to different cultures and people. In Asia I built a very successful and harmonious sales team that was gender diverse, ethnically diverse and culturally diverse. It would be safe to say that I have been exposed to more diversity than any council person.

MEMPHIS City Council Questionnaire 2011

Name: James (Jim) Sdoia

Knowing that a quality education system is vital to the healthy growth of any community, I focused my energies on doing what I could to help improve the educational opportunities for MCS students. Working with MCS we created the Memphis Urban Debate League in 2008. Now beginning its fourth season, the program has grown to include 25 high schools in Memphis.

Over the last few years I have seen the public education system in Memphis being treated as the proverbial red-headed step-child. That was the main impetus for my decision to enter the race for City Council. MCS (and in the future, SCS) and Memphis city government must work closer together. If elected, I will ensure that happens.

The other major reason for my decision to enter the race was the fact that too many members of the council were running unopposed. The citizens of Memphis deserve elections that are contested. Contested elections help to air important issues and let the people decide who will best represent their concerns and needs.

For further information on my background please see the professional and community volunteer resumes which I have attached.

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

Memphis has lost its luster compared to the other major cities in the South. While we have a few major corporate headquarters we just don't have as many job opportunities that we need. We have a lot of good talent in this city. As the founder and facilitator of a Career Transition Networking group that met weekly for 5 years I have seen that talent first-hand. Too many had to leave the Memphis area to find the opportunities they needed to support their families.

My vision is to make Memphis a major center of economic activity in the South. We need to help create more jobs in Memphis by encouraging and supporting the small and medium sized businesses that are already here. We need to proactively find out what our City government can do to help them achieve their goals.

We need to encourage new business start-ups by supporting new business incubators such as EmergeMemphis, The Olivet Incubation and Training Center and the Center for Emerging Entrepreneurial Development (CEED).

We need to recruit more businesses to relocate to Memphis. In doing so we must be careful about the economic incentives we use to entice them. We cannot give away the store in our pursuit of these companies. We should be able to craft agreements that result in win-win situations. I know my years of experience in developing multi-million dollar win-win contracts will be helpful in this endeavor.

All that said, if we do not have the best public education system that we can have, it will be hard to pitch to companies that we have a well trained workforce. It also makes it harder for companies to relocate if they do not feel their employee's families will have a public school system that meets their educational standards.

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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?**

Super District 9 includes a full range of diverse constituents: race, age, gender and socio-economic. I plan to work to address the needs and concerns of all of my constituents in the development of new legislation (ordinances) and to ensure that the enforcement of existing ordinances is done according to due process.

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

- 1) JOBS: Our unemployment rate is worse than the national average. That not only negatively impacts our revenue stream, it also often causes an increase in expenditures to deal with an influx of crime that often results from high unemployment.
- 2) EDUCATION: We need both an educational system and a mindset that promotes high standards of education excellence. We should also look into a program that incorporates trade union training and apprenticeship programs for the unemployed.
- 3) BLIGHTED NEIGHBORHOODS: Eliminate the blight and you will significantly reduce the crime rate as a result.

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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?

I think that the newly formed Economic Development Growth Engine (EDGE) deserves the full support of the City Council. If EDGE is successful in their mission it will go a long way in reducing our unemployment rate. With jobs being our most pressing need this is a program that I fully support.

Kemp Konrad will be the City Council's non-voting board member on EDGE's board and I am sure that he will keep the City Council well informed of the actions of EDGE.

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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?**

My focus would be to work closely with the CDCs that are either directly in, or closely border, Super District 9, such as Southeast Memphis, Jacob's Ladder (Beltline), Frayser, Hickory Hill and Binghamton. I will do what I can to aid and support their programs. I will also reach out to my fellow council persons to provide my help and support for blight reducing projects in their districts. We need to remove blight from every area of Memphis.

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

We are still in large part a divided city. I have had the opportunity to live in many areas of this country. None were as divided among racial lines as Memphis. We need to continue to work on breaking down the distrust between the races that continues to burden this city.

We need to focus less on race and more on how we can work together to build a brighter future for all Memphians.

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Name: James (Jim) Sdoia

- 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.**

According to the City Government website: "The charter provides that it is the duty and responsibility of the City Council to consider the mayor's budget request and to take final action on it which may consist of approval, rejection, or approval with amendments. Additionally, the charter gives the council the responsibility for setting the tax rate and establishing other lawful taxes and fees necessary to secure sufficient revenue to fund the budget as approved. Under the provisions of the City charter the council makes the laws that govern the city. The council also serves as an appeal board for decisions of certain city government departments and boards; for example, decisions of the Land Use Control Board are appealed to the City Council, as are decisions of the Alcohol Commission."

The relationship between the Mayor and the City Council should be a cordial relationship since presumably all of us are focused on working to improve the lives of all of the residents of the City. However, the Council must be able to demonstrate disapproval of actions taken by the Mayor if they feel that those actions are detrimental. That is part of the checks and balances concept built into our system.

The same thinking applies to the other elected and appointed bodies mentioned above.

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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?

I fully support Operation Safe Community and all of its components.

We need to continue the aggressive persecution of gang activity.

I would encourage the development of and/ or reactivation of Neighborhood Watch Groups in all areas. Nothing works better than neighbors watching out for each other. The sooner suspicious activity is reported the quicker the police can respond. Neighborhood Watch signs alone are often deterrents for some crimes.

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

Absolutely! I also think drug testing should be considered as well.

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

Yes, I support our local ethics ordinance. The current ethics ordinance as amended in 2010 appears to be sufficient. I would not recommend any changes at this time.

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

I believe that the City of Memphis must maintain its Maintenance of Effort in support of our schools. I would place that support at \$77.4 million and not at the \$68.4 million number that many support based on the 2,500 drop in student enrollment. My rationale for supporting a \$77.4 million number is that the drop in enrollment has a very negligible impact on the true cost of running the school system.

If the drop in enrollment was just in one small area you could perhaps close a school, dismiss some teachers and administrators, reduce bus routes, etc. But the reality is that the drop in enrollment is spread out over a school system that has 7,500 teachers and 209 schools over a 340.5 square miles area.

The enrollment drop averages 12 students per school. And all 12 are not going to be in the same grade, or have the same teacher. So even with the enrollment drop, the cost of running MCS doesn't significantly change. Instead of reducing the Maintenance of Effort of \$78.4 million by \$4,000 per student, I would support a reduction of \$400 per student that would cover the reduced cost in textbooks, copy paper and other incidentals that would no longer be required. That is how I end up at the \$77.4 million number.

I also believe that the City of Memphis must pay MCS the money the courts have repeatedly told the City it owes. I consider it to be an extreme lack of moral integrity to not comply with the Court's rulings.

It is also important that the City Council show its support of MCS by regular attendance at the MCS monthly board meetings. If elected, I will be at every MCS monthly board meeting that my schedule will allow.

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

The City has made good strides in making the contract bidding process more equitable and transparent. The launch of the <http://memphistn.gov/business/> website provides on line access to both current solicitations as well as information on contracts already awarded. It generally does not get any more transparent than that.

As their representative on the City Council, I will work with any constituents in Super District 9 that feel that their bids for a City contract did not receive full consideration. I will investigate their claims and take appropriate action based on the results of that inquiry.