

Coalition for a Better Memphis Candidate Questionnaire Memphis City Council

Julie Ray – District 7

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?

My background as a business owner and community activist within District 7 has prepared me well for service as the Memphis City Council District 7 representative. I have a solid understanding of the concerns of both business owners and individuals alike. I have also worked closely with a wide array of nonprofit organizations and assisted with city-wide events. This experience gives me a solid grounding to serve my community.

I was born and raised in Memphis and eventually moved to San Francisco, CA in 1991. While living in California, I purchased a business, increased profits over 700% and brought the business concept back to Memphis in 1998. That business, Café Francisco, thrived in the Pinch District for almost 10 years. Café Francisco was more than just a small business, it served as an important community gathering place and anchor in the neighborhood. I am also very proud of the jobs that I was able to provide through the operation of that business.

Due to the region's economic downturn, I closed the Downtown Memphis business in late 2007. However, being a Memphis business owner has been a great learning experience for me. I have been able to fully commit to the Downtown area through organizations like the Downtown Neighborhood Association, for which I serve on the board. I've been a board member for several terms, and for the past two years, I've also served as the Secretary of the Design Review Board at the Downtown Memphis Commission (formerly known as the Center City Commission). Also, I have been fortunate to have the opportunity to be a founding board member of several grass roots organizations; the Memphis Farmer's Market, the Pinch Business Association and the Uptown Community Association. Additionally, I am a graduate of the Citizen's Police Academy and work well with our local police and code enforcement officers on an ongoing basis to resolve issues and address difficulties for our community. In cooperation with other Downtown residents, I helped initiate a program to capture, heal and adopt the homeless dogs and cats in our area. The program was so successful that we merged our

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organization with another animal rescue team, thereby creating homes for many stray animals. I have also been a member of other civic organizations; the Memphis Restaurant Association, Better Business Bureau and South Main Association, just to name a few.

As a business owner, I supported fundraisers for a multitude of charities, including Youth Village's Soup Sunday, Friends for Life, Orpheum Theatre, Memphis Humane Society, Spay Memphis and many other organizations. Additionally I have supported numerous civic events including National Night Out, Downtown Home Tour, Harbor Town Dog Show, and many other community events. Café Francisco, my former business on N. Main Street, served as a Community Center unto itself, brining together people from diverse backgrounds to work for the good of the overall community.

The experience of owning, operating and closing a business within the City of Memphis provided me with invaluable experience and a solid understanding of the specific needs of both employees and employers in Memphis. I fell in love with Memphis, all of it, but, mostly with its potential. I want to take my level of community involvement up a notch, from serving as a longtime community activist and neighborhood volunteer to a city-wide leadership position. I will never stop striving for the full potential of Memphis and I believe that serving on the Memphis City Council in the District 7 position is how I can best contribute to my neighborhood and the City that I love.

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

My vision for the City is already a work in progress through my involvement in the many organizations and entities that I outlined in the previous question. I not only believe in collaboration, organization and teamwork, I live it. For years, I have been in the trenches working to bring this attitude and work ethic to the Memphis City Council and have had the opportunity to work with the other representatives to achieve a better Quality of Life for all Memphians. The number one concern of Memphians in the 7th District right now is **Job** creation, followed closely by **Safety** concerns.

Creating jobs also means we need "job ready" residents. Quality education is imperative for the long-term success of our City. Certainly education is important beginning with grade schools and high schools, but there is also a great need for adult education and retraining, especially in light of the current economic times. I have seen the success of programs within my own community that pair faith-based organizations with businesses to train a

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disenfranchised workforce. I would like to see more of this type of partnership among organizations of all types.

Looking at creative solutions and creative funding for such endeavors is the cornerstone for this vision.

Safety is much less an issue when residents feel financially secure. With the loss of jobs and high property taxes, many homeowners have moved from Memphis to other communities within the tri-state area. This exodus has left vacant and derelict homes creating more opportunities for gang activity, drug use and crime. Working closely with the Memphis Police Department, Code offices and residents, we can employ the "broken windows theory," in essence applying small improvements that produce large results. Clean areas in good repair create community pride and individual ownership.

This effort will not solve all of our problems. I will also research and develop proposals for creative tactics, such as policing on bikes and walking beats in specific areas, creating scorecards by area and /or district, assessing the viability and feasibility of alternative methods of policing, reporting and gathering data.

Job creation and improving safety will be my top priorities.

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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?

The best practice for ensuring diversity in all categories regarding public policy and government is to first come to a consensus as to the goal of our community as a whole. For example, I believe that our common goal is to move forward. Recognizing and respecting our cultural, age, gender, and socio-economic differences while putting our fears aside, we can break down the walls that keep us from moving forward.

I plan on starting with the premise that we are all Memphians, independent of any other label. As such, development of public policy must protect and propel Memphians forward. If our public policy does not propel ALL of Memphians forward, it is not representative public policy or government. If we can remove adjectives, we have moved forward.

Although there are currently on the books policies and ordinances in place that give guidelines toward inclusiveness, the key to insuring diversity in the development of the public policy and government is not in the form of a specific program, but in the form of a **mindset**.

As an individual Councilwoman, I will have an open door policy. Any constituent will be able to talk to their Council representative when needed. In addition, I will schedule and hold regular town hall meetings in District 7. Included in these meetings will be representatives from the various City of Memphis Divisions and Departments, along with myself. These meetings will provide my constituents with the opportunity to meet face to face with the officials shaping policy in this City and to discuss their concerns and suggestions.

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

- 1) High unemployment rate/ job creation
- 2) Blight/Neighborhood Decay
- 3) Poor conditions of the public realm (i.e., streets, sidewalks and general cleanliness).

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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?

The City should take an active role in identifying and removing obstacles for business relocation and creation. The health of our economy depends on this simple fact, strengthening our tax base through viable businesses and jobs for residents of all districts.

I support the actions and strides of The Memphis Chamber and the Memphis ED initiative, which is a part of the Memphis Fast Forward program. In conjunction with the People 1st initiative we cannot only create business, but attract, retain and produce an educated workforce.

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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?

I feel that key elements are already in place to combat issues facing neighborhoods. The real challenges are;

- 1) Enforcement of code violations;
- 2) Ease of access by citizens to take advantage of affordable housing opportunities; and
- 3) Ease of access by citizens to get involved in neighborhood stabilization.

For instance, most communication is done via electronic mediums. Access and availability are cost prohibitive for some. Government should take an active role in developing viable partnerships with Community Centers and Churches to provide electronic access and education for those citizens who cannot afford and/or do not understand this type of communication.

Traditional methods are no longer enough. Electronic access for all citizens to social media, online forms and reporting programs are needed to help citizens stay current and interactive with their government.

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

I think the greatest barrier to growth of our City is something that could also be our greatest asset -- the geographic location of Memphis.

Memphis is part of a tri-state area. However, we have a property tax double that of some of our neighboring states and communities. We are essentially shooting ourselves in the foot on a daily basis. We will be less competitive as a community and less attractive to potential new businesses if we do not make lowering our property tax rate a high priority. In essence, our geographic location mandates that we must have a competitive tax.

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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 role of the City Council is to work in cooperation with the elected officials and citizens to find pathways to success for our City. The Council approves budgets, sets tax rates and other fees to generate revenue for the City. Council proposes laws and ordinances and acts as a resolution board. The Council should work with the City Mayor in a true partnership, providing the necessary checks and balances. Representing the citizens of Memphis, Council guides almost every aspect of the health of the City. I think this a very large responsibility that requires forethought of consequences and should not be taken lightly.

Council and Shelby County Commissioners - work in cooperation for City representation on a County level.

Council and State of Tennessee Shelby County delegation - work in cooperation for City representation at a State level.

Council and MLGW - Work in cooperation for better, cost efficient utilities.

Council and Greater Memphis Chamber - work in cooperation to attract and retain business and business leaders.

Council and Downtown Memphis Commission - work in cooperation to promote and develop the Downtown core as an identity for the 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?

I support the progress of the Fast Forward Memphis initiative, Operation Safe Community. The scorecard at the term end of this initiative shows marked improvement in most areas. I think this program should be assessed, improved and continued as an continued. I support the endeavors and successes of Blue Crush. I feel that looking for creative and alternative ways of utilizing the Memphis Police Department, and assessing viability and feasibility within specific areas, would be something to pursue. Citizen involvement in programs such as Neighborhood Watch is very effective. I believe the MPD has done a great job promoting and supporting this program. I would like to see communities with low participation in this program targeted and subsequently educated as to the effectiveness of the program, and trained as necessary to have successful implementation city-wide.

The real change I would like to see is a strong program to rehabilitate ex-offenders. I believe this is an important part of keeping crime on the decline. Additionally, I would like to see Community Centers better utilized as locations for crime prevention/safety, with educational programs such as Neighborhood Watch.

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

Yes.

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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 believe that maintaining high ethical standards in government is crucial to rebuilding and maintaining public trust of elected officials in our community. Citizens need to know that they can trust their elected officials to make decisions in the public interest. The privilege to serve the public mandates a higher standard of personal and professional conduct. To that end I support any ethics ordinance which holds elected officials to high standards. The only change I would like to see in the existing ethics ordinance is to supplement the the Mayor-appointed Ethics Committee with greater public input and oversight, possibly in the form of a Citizens Review Board.

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

Funding for Memphis City Schools is not generally an issue before the Memphis City Council. The role of the Memphis City Council is simply to approve the budget. However, I recognize that as a special school district, MCS has several funding sources. City funding amounts to less than 10% of the budget, with the largest portion paid by the State of Tennessee. I feel that the current funding by the City of Memphis has been sufficient in the past. Current economic conditions have placed a heavy burden on the City and our schools. I do not think this condition will change in the near future. I feel it is the role of our City to work with the School Board, and all funding sources, to create confidence in our school system. I believe this complicated issue should be assessed, perhaps by impartial participants, to do what is best for the health and welfare of the students.

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

The responsibility of the Memphis City Council to provide transparency and equitability of City Contracts is one of great importance. The use of public funds for contracts should reflect fairness and avoid any implication of nepotism or favoritism. It is in the interest of every taxpayer to know that the City reviews and implements contracts that are in the best interest of its citizens; and this accountability extends to diversity issues and overall economic value.