

Coalition for a Better Memphis Candidate Questionnaire Memphis City Council

Lee Harris – 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?

“Unless a man undertakes more than he possibly can do, he will never do all that he can.” Henry Drummond. I am an active, impatient scholar. At 26, I was appointed to the faculty of the University of Memphis law school, teaching and conducting research in business and the law. I am also a professor in a university program to create more diversity in our state law schools. I was promoted to associate professor after four years of teaching, likely the earliest in the school’s history. I am also the author of two textbooks in business law and many articles. In addition, I am a leader in my community, creating multiple conduits for new voices to get involved in public issues. I am the founding president of the Shelby County Young Democrats, an organization that holds forums for young progressives to dialogue with public leaders in Memphis. I am a co-founder of a fledgling national think tank and speaker’s bureau, New Voices for Social Progress, founded to connect organizations with next generation experts. I am also a frequent columnist and former editorial board member to one of the largest newspapers in Tennessee, The Commercial Appeal. Shortly, I am a teacher, scholar, writer, community activist, not to mention father of two, who loves to cook.

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

I believe it's time for new leadership in our city government. I want to be a strong advocate for skills and jobs in these tough economic times, a transportation system that serves the whole city, and a police force that's given the tools to stop crime. I think we need to stop the blame-game and focus on what's great about this city. Once upon a time, communities, like North Memphis, Frayser, and Raleigh were the economic engines of the city. Today, with the right leadership, I believe there's enough talent and energy in these communities to do it again.

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?

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District 7 is one of the most diverse communities in the city. It is comprised of a full spectrum of races and socio-economic levels. I intend to run a campaign—and later a city council office—that casts as wide a net as possible, giving access to folks from various cultural, religious, and economic background. I want to have office hours where citizens from the community can visit and discuss issues with their councilman. I also plan to join the boards of important charitable associations in District 7 and attend neighborhoods association meetings to ensure that I hear a wide range of voices.

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

Though I started this campaign only two weeks ago, I have talked to hundreds of voters. Based on these conversations and living in Memphis all of my life, three issues are consistently mentioned—education, jobs, and crime. The educational system in Memphis and Shelby County is at a crossroads at this very moment. When it comes to education, District 7 has an extremely low level of high school graduation. What's more, the various governmental bodies—from the City Council to the School Board to the County School Board—seem to frequently be on a different page. I have vast experience in early childhood education and it seems to me that improving statistics, like the high school graduation rate, requires starting when kids are 4 years old. Furthermore, the recession that hit this nation took a toll on everyone. Memphians have been especially hit hard and the city and has struggled to get back on its feet. We need to create an environment that welcomes businesses to our areas and creates jobs. Finally, we have a serious issue with crime in this city and more specifically in District 7. We need to ensure that our police force is well-funded and has all the necessary resources at their disposal to keep Memphians safe.

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 believe the city government plays a pivotal role in economic development. I have seen firsthand in District 7 that there are already numerous organizations working hard to create a better life for the people of North Memphis, Frayser and Raleigh. Here's what I have heard and would support so far. I would support lending expertise and capital to our neighborhood community development corporations, so that they can begin the process of knocking down or redeveloping vacant houses. I would also support building a bus depot in the Frayser/North Memphis area to help residents in this community move from place to place. Finally, I would support greater and more expanded code enforcement to get a handle on blight in some of the communities in District 7.

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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?

We have to recognize and support the community initiatives already on-going in District 7. We have programs, like Lifeline, a non-profit that gives job training to ex-offenders and puts them to work landscaping and taking care of vacant properties. We don't necessarily need a new government initiative, but we need to support and direct city resources to these programs, programs that seem to work and where community leaders already have a good idea about how to tackle the problem. As I have mentioned, one thing city government can do in order to tackle blight is to empower code enforcement. We need more code enforcement officers and we should look at possibly expanding the tools at their disposal. Many community residents I have talked to have told me that code enforcement only comes out when someone complains. We want an active, independent-minded office of code-enforcement that takes care of festering problems throughout the community, regardless of whether it is called to the scene.

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

Cooperation. I believe one of the greatest barriers to the growth of Memphis is lack of trust and cooperation between government officials and between government officials and citizens. It is time to put petty differences aside, stop the blame-game, and move forward together.

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.

A good city council person represents and fights for the various constituent elements of their district. Service and accessibility are the hallmarks. An effective city council should support the community and community-led initiatives. Also, a city council should be accessible to the public. All of the aforementioned bodies should strive to work together, because this is the only way to get something done and combat the perception of ineffective government.

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

First, we need to ensure that our police force is both well-funded and is being used appropriately. Second, we need to make sure we are educating children appropriately about the repercussions of crime.

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

Yes.

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

Yes I do applaud the efforts put forth in order to create a more ethical environment in our city government. As a young lawyer, I was recognized for my commitment to ethics and inducted into the Leo Bearman Inns of Court. However, I do believe there is still much to be done. While I will say that Mayor A. C. Wharton has taken many steps in the right direction, including the hire of a Chief Ethics Officer, there is more that can be done to ensure the public that the representatives they elect are being held to the absolute highest standards. For instance, I would

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suggest that the current penalties for wrongdoing are insufficient and might be heightened.

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

We must fund schools, without delay, at reasonable levels. I believe I am the only educator in this race and I take this responsibility of city government very seriously. We not only have to fund the schools but we need to put that money to good use. We need to make sure that we are creating an inviting atmosphere for teachers through training and adequate pay, and as stated before we need to find ways to implement after school programs accessible to all children. The statistics for high-school graduation in some areas of District 7 are disappointing to say the least. We need to work hard not just with schools but with the parents as well to make sure that these numbers increase dramatically.

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

Every operation of city government has to be completely transparent, particularly the contracting process. Also, we need to ensure that both females and minorities are given their fair opportunity to bid on these contracts. This may require action and thinking in a new direction for city government. For instance, perhaps city government can play a more active role in recruiting applicants for city contracts, instead of waiting to receive bids.