

# Coalition for a Better Memphis Candidate Questionnaire Memphis City Council

Shea Flinn, District 9, Position 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 am a son of Memphis. I attended High School at Memphis University School; I received my college degree from Rhodes College, and my law degree from the University of Memphis. In the 38 years, I have called Memphis my home; I have experienced a cross section of our community from growing up in East Memphis, living in Midtown, living in Downtown, and the University area. I have loved every part of the city I have lived. I love Memphis, it really is that simple. This is not a blind love; however, in my day to day business at Flinn Broadcasting I am exposed to every facet our community has to offer, I see the reasons to hope and the reasons to beware. From the Tea Party to the Party people, the business elite to the "street" businesses the wide array of formats give me the opportunity to gain understanding of what life is like in every corner of our community. Any rational mind looking at Memphis can see that significant challenges still face our community. The same rational person would see that this does not mean hope is lost or Memphis is lost, because improvements have been made and continue to be made, but hard choices still face us. As Churchill famously said, "We are not at the end, nor the beginning of the end, but perhaps we are at the end of the beginning."

## MEMPHIS City Council Questionnaire 2011

Name: George Shea Flinn, III

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

Memphis must become magnetized to attract people back to our city. The loss of middle class citizens and the growth in our poverty rate has been devastating to our civic health. To heal our city, we must recognize that this will require years of incremental steps. A poverty rate at 24% represents a significant outflow of municipal resources and no inflow. We must lower this percentage, by lowering it 5%, we put ourselves on par with Nashville and free up millions of dollars that currently keep our head above the water, but could then be deployed to push us forward. We lower this poverty rate by addressing a critical failing in our community. Currently less than 1% of business receipts go to minority or women owned businesses. If you couple that statistic with our demographics that means that 1% goes to about 70% of our population, with the other 99% going to just 30% of our population. The math doesn't work, if you intend on having a middle class. The cities across our country with the strongest middle class are moving forward the best. We simply must join their number.

The council working with the administration must strengthen our outreach to grow minority owned businesses. The recent establishment of a micro-loan program providing seed money to local start ups is a step in the right direction. The Council involvement must not end with the funding of money; rather the money must be watched so these loans are made on the basis of a workable business plan, and a reasonable chance of success, rather than a pie in the sky business idea coupled with political connections. Implemented correctly this program not only offers the opportunities for the entrepreneurs to start generational wealth, but will bring much needed jobs to our community. We can not ignore the need to attract large corporation to our community and the jobs they bring, but the small business that becomes a larger business is the most cost effective way to reverse the trend in our unemployment numbers.

The council can further aid in both large and small business attraction by distancing ourselves from the unseemly reputation we have earned over the past decades. I am not naïve enough to think that politics will ever be held in high regard, but we must do better to provide open, honest leadership. In four years on the council I have made myself available to those who agree with me, but I have made myself really available to those who disagree. Not every argument is a battle between good and evil, not every division in our community has its roots in hate and we must as a community stop all such assumptions.

Government in it of itself can not solve all the problems. If the citizenry do not take advantage of such programs as the micro loan program and then work hard and effectively, the program will fail. But government can create the conditions for individual success that ultimately lifts the entire community.

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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 Council can use the Personnel Committee's approval process for Boards and Commissions, as well as Municipal directors to continue to have policies built on inclusion. While whoever is sitting in the Mayor's chair deserves deference in their selection process, the council approval process is not a mere formality, but a critical check in our system to make sure that diversity of people and ideas are present and engaged in our civic debates.

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

The Three issues facing Memphis will be echoed by many large urban cities in our country:

1) Economic Development: As previously stated, we are showing positive movement in this direction. Streamlining the recruitment process by creating the EDGE board goes a long way in removing a competitive disadvantage in recruiting companies. Particularly, cutting down on political posturing when it comes to business recruitment that was proving so disastrous for us, and so beneficial to our friend in Mississippi, these changes will go a long way. The Micro-loan program if administered properly will allow us to not only open for big business, but tell our young entrepreneurs and young college graduates that in Memphis you can achieve your goals. We must make sure though that the growth from this increased economic activity is shared with our entire community and not just the 30%.

2) Crime: Crime is down in our community in every major category with the sole exception of domestic violence. We must continue this good work by sticking with the pioneering BLUE CRUSH statistical model. But we must not rest on our laurels either, an increase in neighborhood and community policing is the necessary next step in further reduction of crimes in all categories.

3) Education: Memphis and Shelby County will be presented with a unique and rare opportunity in the coming years the chance to redevelop urban education for our country. The charter surrender enacted in March, provides the opportunity to create a zone model of education that provides greater local accountability and control of our education. Neighborhoods have unique characteristics and unique needs. These needs can be better met by creating 5 distinct zones, each with their own superintendent and each with their own local advisory board, answerable to a unified school board. This model has been proven in other jurisdictions to save on administrative cost, it will reduce the "district" size to the nationally recommended number of 35,000 (both school systems are deemed too big). As a councilmember I will continue to advocate for us realizing the promise of this opportunity rather than succumbing to the fear of change.

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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?

We have already discussed some specific ways that government has begun and can continue to create an atmosphere of economic growth. Additionally, we must continue to pursue the Memphis Fast Forward economic agenda. Granted the worldwide financial tumult has slowed our momentum but it has not destroyed it. We must continue with the revamping of our Workforce Investment Network, which at one point in time was being forced to return money to the state, is now broadening its reach, and consequently its need. The City must make sure we have a workforce capable of competing in a knowledge based economy, this is not merely a job for the schools when educating the workforce of tomorrow, but is also incumbent on local government to provide training for the workforce of today.

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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?

Again, government must work to create the climate conducive to growth. In midtown we were able to do this by passing the Midtown Overlay. Over a period of nine months, real estate developers, preservationists, neighborhood groups and business groups met to come up with a comprehensive set of guidelines for smart growth in Midtown. The overlay works in conjunction with the recently passed Unified Development Code, provides protections from unchecked, shoddy development, but also allows the developer to know on the front end before they have invested a lot of money in a plan that will not be accepted by the local community. The overlay provides blue print for other area of town on how we can get negotiations between developers and community absent political pressure tactics (from either side), but allows all parties to enter into the relationship with an eyes wide open stance.

Smart growth is critical to our community when looked at through the lens of our tax problem. We have stretched the property tax as far as we can. We can not let the spread between our tax rate and those of our competing municipalities grow any further, we can no longer tax our way into prosperity. Nor, with such a large impoverished population are we going to be able to humanely cut our way there. The only chance is to grow our way there, creating revenue for the city by actually raising the value of property in the city. We cannot do this with swath of blight all throughout our community. We must continue to lobby our legislators to give municipalities the tools necessary to seize blighted homes and then we need to work with private individuals, companies and non-profits to turn blighted properties to active working properties.

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

The largest barrier is a failure to have an actual conversation on the difference between what we want from government and what we need from government. We must prioritize our resources more effectively. Unfortunately, this means saying the vilest curse word in political language, "No." This means saying, "No", to projects that are wonderfully thought out, might be wonderfully implemented, and might really help some people, but we just don't have the resources. As stated above, I fear we have reached our breaking point in our property tax rate, many services that we are used to the government providing, we simply are not going to be able to provide anymore. In some ways this can lead to a drastic change, such as some programs being eliminated all together, but we can also through partnerships with the private and non-profit sector find ways to re-imagine how and who delivers those services, a wonderful example on the county side is the Shelby Farms Conservancy, or on the city side, the growing movement for a conservancy for Overton Park. Prioritization will not be conflict or pain free, but it is absolutely necessary if we are to move Memphis forward.

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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 council is to set a tax rate that funds body our city departments, and our support of the Memphis City Schools. On many boards we have an advisory or watchdog role to insure the monies allocated to the various departments are spent prudently and free from corruption. The Schools being an exception as we have learned through litigation that our role there is merely to approve their budget (a classic choice of voting yes, or voting aye) and approving their use of reserve funding. Beyond that we have no control over education beyond the bully pulpit.

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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?

The success of the BLUE CRUSH model is readily apparent in the most recent statistics showing a double digit decline in almost all major areas of crime. We must continue to be a national leader in this effort. Therefore we must allow the BLUE CRUSH model to evolve where it not only follows the statistics of where crime has happened but prevents crime from happening by increasing the neighborhood policing concept as a necessary next step not a departure from BLUE CRUSH.

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

Yes, I would be willing, but as I said last time, I think it somewhat detrimental to those who could do well, but might have done some bad in their past. I would further submit that the adversarial nature of politics generally takes care of this for the public.

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

The ethic ordinance has been changed fairly heavily, some tweaks are still needed, but we have come a long way in this area.

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

One must separate the moral responsibility and the legal one. The legal responsibility known as the Maintenance of Effort, which treats Memphis and Memphians differently and unfairly when compared to the rest of the State. This is liable to change with the recent merger vote. The unified district however will not alleviate a moral responsibility for Memphis to take an active participation in the education of our children. The city should reserve some of the dollars currently allocated for the MOE, and turn it in to grant and innovation awards for reform efforts for schools located in Memphis. Where as now the city acts as a rubber stamp for school funding, the re-purposed dollars could be tied performance and results and targeted directly into the classroom. This model is a major step in bringing efficiency to the tremendous resources we already expend on educating our children.

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

We have an absolute responsibility to transparency, but at this time with every city contract being available on the City website, I would argue that we are meeting that responsibility head on.