

# Coalition for a Better Memphis Candidate Questionnaire Memphis City Council

## Wanda Halbert – District 4

- 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?**

As a corporate professional and life-long Memphian, over the past 17 years, I've served as a parent advocate, seven years on the Memphis School Board, and the past four years with the Memphis City Council. My hands on experience as a taxpaying citizen supporting the rights and needs of citizens enhance my personal commitment to serving as the District 4 representative.

Over the last four years I am most proud of the revitalization and redevelopment I've helped to establish in District 4, a feat that has not been done in more than 20 years. I've created Memphis' first Minority and Women Business Enterprise Commission, strongly advocated for the Small Business Enterprise initiative, established a utility payment assistance program for those in need, and eliminated a tremendous amount of city-wide blight.

Also over the last 4 years, I personally sponsored a resolution that gave an additional \$2.4 Million to MCS for literacy (coverage for grade students). Throughout my community, I've always participated in organized efforts to help with back to school supply drives, developing young leadership, and helping families with positive student behavior in school.

There have been so many accomplishments (attached in a separate email) but I could not have done it without the assistance of many division directors and community supporters working with me.

My elected and non-elected leadership in the city has clearly demonstrated my ability to represent the citizens of District 4 and stands on its own merits of accomplishment.

MEMPHIS City Council Questionnaire 2011

Name: WANDA HALBERT

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

President Obama once said, "On every front there are clear answers out there that can make this country stronger, but we're going to break through the fear and the frustration people are feeling. Our job is to make sure that even as we make progress, that we are also giving people a sense of hope and vision for the future."

Memphis is truly a great city with a plethora of potential. There are issues we continue to struggle with but drag our feet to address. Outdated transportation, economic parity, race relations, a non-accountable education system, lack of shared investments, out of the box thinking, and many others continue to leave us *scratching our heads*. Just when we've implemented new programs and strategies, those old issues peak and cause this great city to take a few steps back.

I believe Memphis should support a vision where all citizens are uplifted, well-educated and economically empowered. We must create jobs and develop new businesses, realizing jobs are keys to income but business ownership is the key to wealth. Without a clear vision, we can continue to dream dreams that will not be achieved. I believe in Memphis and I believe we can make dreams come true!!

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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?

Memphis should develop public policy that addresses a City Diversity Plan that recognizes all people have different qualities, skills, qualifications, experience and attitudes. We should value making the most of these differences and believe they can improve government, quality of life and overall greatness of our city.

Memphis should ensure its legislative ordinances ensure the principles of equity and diversity and are maintained as an active part of its goals and objectives and should attempt to encourage all citizens to participate/contribute to the success of the established plan by promoting and publicizing its principles.

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4. What are the three greatest issues facing the City of Memphis today?
- **Reduce Crime**: Memphis is not different than other metro cities experiencing crime. With a new police director, Memphis is beginning to reintroduce community policing initiatives. I would also like to see Memphis create diversion and rehabilitation programs for ex –offenders so they may become good citizens and not recycled through the justice system and support tougher penalties for real crimes, and finally, establish justice in policing. Citizens should not be afraid of where they live. Memphis must develop a clear vision, mission, goals, and objectives to address the myriad of issues surround crime.
  - Memphis should place more emphasis on eliminating/reducing **High Taxes, Blight and Homelessness** by utilizing more efforts of the Neighborhood Stabilization Program in holding property owners accountable for the upkeep of properties. When failure of those owners occurs, Memphis should create its own land bank to use those properties as it deems necessary including new infrastructure to help eliminate homelessness. Memphis needs to by eliminating government waste, utilize Memphis' economic assets, explore ways to include those working in the city but living outside its boundaries to help invest in its infrastructure (\$4.1 Billion dollars annually), and support consolidation of services with county and regional partners when deemed necessary and appropriate.
  - Out city must continue to **Create New Business/Job Opportunities and Strengthen Accountability of our Struggling Education System**. The city has lured new companies to relocate/set up infrastructure however; we must continue to pursue relocation of new companies while offering incentives being careful not to “give away the store” and protecting job opportunities for its citizenry, those who help make the needed investments. We cannot forget establishing local entrepreneurial opportunities, growing partnerships, and investing in small/minority/women business initiatives. Though we've recently experienced a consolidation of school systems, we should partner with our schools, and demand/expect realistic and measurable goals and objectives. So goes the education of our children, so goes the city of Memphis and this is not solely tied to funding.

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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?

Memphis government should play in promoting and nurturing economic development for the community should be a positive one that not only attracts new businesses, but also cultivates the present ones with new focus on small, minority, and women owned business. We should seek investments to help keep them housed in the city with a plan of growth and continued development.

Over the past four years I sponsored a resolution creating the city's Minority and Women Business Enterprise Commission (MWBE), an appointed body that oversees equity in opportunities for MWBEs and strongly advocated for the Small Business Enterprise initiative. These are only two established strategies I plan to continue supporting as a member of the city council.

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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 must continue to utilize our Community Enhancement division partnered with the local Realtors Association to enhance redevelopment in blighted community and make them “livable” and inviting to new families. Additionally, we cannot simply relocate low income families and not give them the necessary tools for successful home ownership and community engagement in an effort to revitalize chosen communities.

The City of Memphis needs to abandon its out-dated way of thinking it is a barrier to the city taking over ownership of distressed properties and create a vision/plan to help include those properties as part of our redevelopment/blight elimination/and homeless restoration plan.

There are laws that allow cities to take over distressed properties; we simply need the leadership and vision to make them livable again.

As a current council member, I have personally had more than 1,200 to 1,300 distressed properties in District 4 cited, 38 of them have been forced into litigation. I will continue my responsibilities to eliminate blight and replace it with redeveloped properties/programs to make them livable again.

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

Memphis unfortunately continues to struggle with old socio-economic and racial issues. We don't want to take ownership of that but it certainly exists. Additionally, Memphis' "PERSONALITY POLITICS" serves as a barrier for growth as well as it repeated negative message it sends about itself.

Our city is better than that but without us removing these barriers; we will continue to struggle unnecessarily.

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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.

As the legislative branch of government, the city council proposes (and votes on) resolutions/ordinances, establish laws, and accept, deny, or modify the recommended budget of the administration. Council members serve as the voice of their constituents and must realize their decisions affect all citizens of Memphis not just those they are elected to serve.

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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?

Addressed in #4

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

I've been elected to serve the citizens of Memphis for 11 years. While it is unnecessary to run a background check on me, one certainly can discover public issues relative to MY background if they deem necessary through any number of public avenues that exist.

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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 definitely support a local ethics ordinance. The city's current ordinance is a good start but does not appear to leave open questions with regard to the US Constitution in that one is innocent until proven guilty by a court of peers. The current ordinance penalizes by removing one from a seat until proven innocent. Additionally, it causes citizens to be left with unequal representation. The ordinance needs to be revisited to ensure we are not in violation of federal law (verified this fact via legal representation) and a process for replacement of removed representatives is in order.

We do not have room for unethical leaders in our community and all should respect the value of their roles and the honor/privilege of representing the citizens of Memphis.

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

Tennessee's state law is very clear in defining the county government as responsible for funding public education. In the past, the City of Memphis CHOSE to levy a separate tax to add additional funding to support its students, however, in 2008, there was an attempt to pass an amendment to a state bill making it mandatory effective immediately that any municipality currently paying into its school system be required to pay immediately and forever no less than that same amount. This amendment was moved into committee and has not resurfaced. Now Memphis is the only city in the State of TN made via court order to pay twice for public schools (double taxation). Since the citizens of Memphis have now voted to consolidate, the city would not have a requirement to fund public schools twice as with other municipal cities in the county.

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

The city council can pass any law/ordinance it deems necessary to ensure bidding is more equitable and transparent; however, the city's administration has authority over the processes established.