

COALITION FOR A BETTER MEMPHIS
Shelby County Commissioner Candidate Questionnaire
Election Date: May 4, 2010

Name: James O. Catchings, Ed.D

District for which you are running: District 3, Position 1

Section 1: Qualifications and Background (2 questions)

Section 2: Vision and Strategies (4 questions)

Section 3: Improving the Education System (4 questions)

1. QUALIFICATIONS AND BACKGROUND

- 1. Describe your qualifications for holding the office of Shelby County Commissioner. (Please answer in the space below and attach a resume.)**

My qualifications for holding the office of Shelby County Commissioner are my educational achievements. I have an earned doctorate of education degree from the University of Memphis. I have served as principal of several Memphis City Schools, which has equipped me with the ability to listen to problems, gather information, analyze the information, and come to a viable solution.

- 2. What events or experiences caused you to decide to run for this office?**

The events which caused me to seek the district 3 position 1 seat is the conditions of the district in terms of crime, lack of economic development, and the declining conditions of the neighborhood. I plan to use the skills, which I have acquired to make a difference in the lives of the citizens of the district. I am retired and have the time and energy to work diligently in improving the district by working cooperatively with the other district 3 commissioners, as well as the entire Board of Commissioners.

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2. VISION AND STRATEGIES

1. In your opinion, what are the three greatest issues (problems or opportunities) facing Shelby County in the next four years?

If I had to identify the greatest issues facing the City of Memphis today and during the next four years, I would name crime, economic development and education. **Crime:** The need to feel safe in one’s own home and surroundings is primary. Reducing crime can be aided by citizen involvement with neighborhood watch, more police precincts and police officer and greater emphasis on code enforcement. A greater police presence can be achieved and maintained by designating a single car to be used to transport criminals to jail, thereby, allowing more cars to remain on the streets. Also, the addition of state of the art technology for police to use in fighting crime is necessary to give police the “edge” needed to reduce criminal activity, e.g. a fingerprinting or identification unit for each car to get immediate feedback on past criminal activity when suspects are apprehended so that they are not released to commit other crimes. Stiffer sentences for gun related crimes will aid in deterring crime.

Economic Development: The need to expand employment opportunities for all citizens is fundamental for the growth and progress of our city. Attracting businesses to our city and collaborating with governments in the tri-state area will provide jobs for our citizens and aid them to provide a wider tax base to fund government services. The recent acquisition of the Toyota plant by Tupelo, MS is an example. Entities that extend beyond our boundaries could aid immensely to economic growth of our citizens. If our government had extended its support and aided in the plant being located in Marion, AR, the benefit to our citizens would have been enormous. Supporting facilities that are not within our borders will allow our city to benefit economically. Such benefits will also enable the city to provide a living wage to help citizens become more independent and productive. With the wonderful natural resources of our city, Memphis can become a Mecca for businesses of all types to establish hubs that will aid greatly in improving the economy of our citizens. In District 3, the anticipated expansion of Graceland will provide jobs and positive publicity for our city. If crime must be reported, the reporting procedures should be consistent with other cities.

Education: As a lifelong educator, the plight of our students is one that is close to my heart. I feel that to educate the whole child, our efforts must not be confined to the regular school day. We must provide more after school and summer programs, more community centers that provide skills and academic training as well as recreation and greater parental involvement. We must also provide more training to enable teachers to create positive learning environments to address the growing diverse student population. Such training will aid in providing quality education and the skill base needed to support the workforce for current and future businesses and industries. We need to report positive educational initiatives locally, and nationally, such as the Gates’ grant for teacher’s effectiveness and other initiatives, which were put in place by the current superintendent of schools.

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2. Shelby County's debt is seen by many people as a threat to county government. How would you propose that the county pay down its debt? How would you prevent additional debt in the future?

Ways for the county to pay down its debt:

- Increase economic development by attracting more businesses with special emphasis on helping small businesses and providing jobs with livable wages. This could be done by creating tax incentives for both large and small businesses. The Pilot Program available for large businesses could be also provided for small businesses. There is a need to share the tax burden with workers who make their living in the city and county, but pay no taxes because they live in other states. This could be done by a payroll or privilege tax or some other form of tax.
- Functional consolidation of city and county services that would not involve the schools. Example: The Memphis and Shelby County Fire department could be consolidated. As many of the other city and county agencies as feasible could use this model. This will eliminate the current salaries as well as the retirement cost.
- Close under utilized schools. This could be a huge savings of tax payer's money. However, this is a school system call, but the commission could encourage this process. The closed schools could be utilized as business incubators for start-up companies.

Preventing additional debt in the future:

- Do a needs assessment to determine the services needed to support county government.
- Conduct an assessment of the tax base and other revenue sources to determine the bottom line revenue for the county.
- Make spending decisions based on income.
- Continue to grow the economy of Shelby County Government by growing large and small businesses.
- Personnel hiring practices should be based on data and need of the county.

3. The Memphis City Council has taken steps over the last few years attempting to shift the burden of funding both city and county schools to Shelby County residents. What are your views regarding the best way to fund public education of Shelby County and Memphis children?

Regarding the funding of the schools, I agree with the single source funding arrangement with the City being responsible for fully funding the Regional Medical Center (MED) and the Shelby County residents funding the schools. Currently the City of Memphis residents are being taxed twice. This is a fair and equitable arrangement for both systems, and it will take the politics out of the process of funding our schools.

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4. Some people believe that urban communities should adopt policies that encourage what is called “smart growth.” Do you believe Shelby County should have a general policy about new residential and commercial developments? If so, what should that policy be?

The policy should state that new residential and commercial developments should invest time, attention, and resources in restoring communities and vitality to center cities and older suburbs. It should be more town-centered, in transit and pedestrian oriented, and has a greater mix of housing, commercial and retail use.

These principles should guide smart growth:

- Create range of housing opportunities and choices
- Create walkable neighborhoods
- Encourage community and stakeholders collaboration
- Foster distinctive communities with a strong sense of pride
- Make development decisions, predictable, fair and cost effective.

3. IMPROVING THE SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT

1. What do you regard as the greatest obstacle or barrier to economic growth in Shelby County today? What can the County Commission do to reduce that impediment?

The greatest obstacle or barrier to economic growth in Shelby County today is poverty and the lack of good paying jobs. This condition causes crime, blight and, abandon buildings. To change this reality, the Shelby County Government could refocus our marketing strategy to encourage from a distribution center with low paying jobs to a high tech, bio medical center. For example: Medtronic, Smith & Nephew, Wright Medical and Bio-Tech. We should continue to capitalize on the Aerotropolis transportation advantages we are creating in the Airport area.

2. What is your philosophy about offering incentives to companies that are considering major new investments or job expansions in Shelby County?

I agree that we should offer incentives to companies that are considering relocating in the County and offering major investments and job creations. We should offer incentives that are mutually beneficial to the county and the company. There should be a penalty for companies moving as soon as the tax benefit expires. Any way that the county can support and encourage job growth should be supported.

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3. What is your view regarding the best way to address financing of The Med and the need for public health options?

In funding the MED, I favor the arrangement where the City of Memphis will fund the MED and Shelby County government will fund the schools. Additionally, funding for the MED should come from other hospitals in the county because the MED is serving indigent patients that are in the entire mid-south region. Without the MED, neighboring hospitals would be forced to serve an influx of patients. The second source of funding should come from surrounding state, such as Mississippi and Arkansas. The state and federal government should be the third source of funding.

4. When you complete your service as commissioner, what do you want your legacy to be?

When I complete my service as commissioner, I would like to be remembered as a commissioner who brought integrity, leadership, accountability and dependability to the office. I would like for my legacy to include the belief that I was someone who worked diligently on constituent services, and made a difference in the district and the overall community. I would like to leave the district far better than it is now. These are the issues that I would like to improve:

- Reduce crime with emphasis on community policing (CO-Acts), elimination of blight, vacant buildings and other sources of crime.
- Improve the educational opportunities by fully funding Memphis City Schools, more after school summer programs, and community centers.
- Increase economic development by attracting more businesses with special emphasis on helping small businesses, and providing jobs with livable wages. Improve the condition of Southland Mall and attract stores that will provide high end merchandise.

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