

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

**Name:** Reginald Milton

**District for which you are running:** District 2 – Position 3

**Section 1: Qualifications and Background (2 questions)**

**Section 2: Vision and Strategies (4 questions)**

**Section 3: Improving the Education System (4 questions)**

<b>1. QUALIFICATIONS AND BACKGROUND</b>
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**1. Describe your qualifications for holding the office of Shelby County Commissioner. (Please answer in the space below and attach a resume.)**

I have a Master's Degree in Public Administration from the University of Memphis. I have spent the past 15-years as a Community Organizer aiding our poor and disenfranchised citizens. In the year 2000 I started the nonprofit agency South Memphis Alliance, Inc. (SMA, Inc.) to provide better services and support to women, children and adults within low-income urban communities.

As the Executive Director of SMA, Inc. I manage a growing staff, operate three facilities and several social service programs as well as providing support to ten local neighborhood associations. Over the years I have brought millions of dollars to the city of Memphis and have helped thousands of individuals improve their lives. I have provided our incarcerated youth with services to better cope with the challenges of life. I have provided single mothers with the tools and resources to start their own business. I have worked to find homes for foster children, and I have proudly stood shoulder to shoulder with community residents in their struggle to protect their neighborhoods.

Additionally I serve as a board member for more than half a dozen local non-profit organizations and civic groups including Memphis City Beautiful, Memphis Literacy Council, Shelby County Community Development Committee and the Memphis Heritage Association.

I have a great deal of experience in building consensus, conflict resolution, policy setting and budget management.

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

Having lived in this community my entire life and witnessed firsthand the challenges it faces I have a personal commitment to the growth and development of District 2. The financial crisis that our nation is now facing has had an even greater impact on cities like Memphis with large

percentages of citizens already living in poverty. Many of the challenges that Memphis & Shelby County face are interrelated. From health disparities to crime, to economic empowerment for minority-owned businesses, there are many issues that we need to address proactively in order to move Shelby County forward

Primarily, it is clear to me that in the near future local governments will have to make cuts in expenditures and scale back on services in order to get our economy back on track. Too often it is the voices of the poor and disenfranchised that are rarely heard in the halls of government and these residents will shoulder the brunt of these cut backs.

As a Community Organizer I realize now more than ever we need civic-minded individuals in our local government to help ensure that all our citizens are heard. When policy decisions are made, it is important that they are well thought-out and that the impact of these decisions are clearly communicated and understood by both the voters and all Commissioners. This overarching concern in addition to my commitment to public service and passion for our community are reasons why I have chosen to run for Shelby County Commission District 2. I am confident that my background and experience in serving the community are strengths that will be an asset to contribute to a more effective local government and solutions-oriented approach to confronting the challenges that prevent progress for our communities. To me, it's not about having a job. It's all about doing the job.

## 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?

1. **Shelby County Debt** - With a County debt of nearly two billion dollars it is clear addressing this issue will consume much of my time in office. I do not favor an increase in taxes nor do I see a restructuring of our regressive property tax system any time in the near future. Please see below for my position on the best approach to identifying solutions to decrease the county deficit.
2. **Jobs** – Our citizens must have livable wage jobs. This starts by finding innovative ways to help our local small business owners succeed as well as identifying effective strategies that will work to attract new businesses to our area. In 2006 with the help of the Women's Foundation for a Greater Memphis and First Tennessee Bank I started the **Opportunity Bank**, which provides training and financial support to those wishing to start their own business.

Unemployment and underemployment has a negative impact on nearly every service under the City and County - from the MED to the jail to our school system. We must get our people back to work if we plan to have any impact on these other issues.

3. **Inner-City Revitalization** - Everyone deserves to live in a safe, clean environment. Many urban communities are on the frontline in the battle against crime and drugs. When community residents are asked to name some of the core problems their neighborhoods face - blight, is always in the top three. As a current **Commissioner for Memphis City Beautiful**, I am committed to working with local civic groups and residents to ensure that that we proactively address these issues. In previous years, I have worked closely with fine organizations such as the Sierra Club and Memphis Heritage Association to improve the esthetics of our beautiful city and county.

Recently, Shelby County Mayor Joe Ford appointed me to the **Core City Development, Redevelopment and Revitalization Task Force**. Our mission is to focus on ways to improve the quality of life for all of our residents.

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?**

Much of the county's expenditures are mandated by law, contracts or union agreements. I will continue what Commissioners are already doing and that is to systematically look at ways of reducing cost and preventing duplication. But there is only so much cutting you can do until the process begins to have a negative impact, costing us more than it saves. The current position that the county is in presents a long-term challenge. In the short term we must focus on staying afloat while our economy recovers. This requires sound and prudent money management, skills I use daily to successfully operate and manage SMA and run a successful small business. We must be creative and by this I do not mean creative in finding new ways to tax our citizens. We must be willing to entertain new ideas, including consolidation. Presently I hold no position one way or the other on consolidation, but I am open and eager to be more involved in the discussion.

My experience has shown that the most effective approach to preventing additional debt in the future requires sound budget oversight and management. This question also brings up the serious debates on whether or not our highly regressive tax system can continue to sustain our growing government. This plays to the argument that government cannot be all things to all people. There are limits. This is why Smart Growth planning is such an important strategy, of which I am a strong proponent. By using development to strengthen communities we reduce the demand on government resources thus lending a proactive approach to reducing expenses and decreasing the need to spend what we do not have to forge progress for our 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?**

It is regrettable that we have come to a "we versus them" in the discussion of all our children. If there is to be any merit found in this discussion it would be that we are discussing it. The resolution over equity in taxation is one that is long overdue. It falls in

line with my view that single source funding is the only equitable means of funding our school system.

We need to end the divisive discussions of Memphis, or Germantown or Bartlett or Collierville or Arlington or Millington and talk about Shelby County. This issue will never go away until we have tax equity.

As county commissioner I will look to insuring our schools received the funds necessary to educate our children and I will do that by working to make sure everyone pulls their weight.

**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?**

As stated earlier I am a strong advocate for Smart Growth. Without such a plan many communities, especially in poorer areas, find themselves at the mercy of those whose sole interest is profit. In such a situation often short term profits win out over long-term development.

Recently I spoke before the County Commission on an issue dealing with a housing developer receiving 140 Homestead lots to build single-family rental houses. The concerns were from the designs of the houses to the impact of increasing the number of rental properties in that area. If there were a development plan in place that set limits to the types of construction, established design criteria, and promoted an overall community center approach, much of these concerns would be averted.

### 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?**

My response to this question involves three intertwined factors: Inequality, crime and economic development. I don't believe that you can adequately address economic growth without giving consideration to all three factors. A positive impact on any will lead to improvements in all. Since the question is what can the County Commission do to address these obstacles, it is my view that we must focus on identifying solutions to reduce income disparities in our communities and take an in depth look at the root causes behind the high rates of unemployment, crime and poverty in Memphis & Shelby County.

The disinvestment in urban communities has created a very distinct underclass in Shelby County. An underclass that is dependent on the illegal market to sustain itself. This has

made crime an income source that must be protected by those who depend upon it directly and indirectly. Expanding economic opportunities to this population helps break that dependence.

As County Commissioner I will work with City Council to support more community center services that will have a better chance of reaching this population and creating opportunities for those wishing to improve their lives and reestablish themselves as contributing members in our society. Additionally I will work to provide additional support and resources for minority and women-owned business development initiatives. Promoting and encouraging entrepreneurship is a creative strategy to bring new dollars, job opportunities and talent to our county.

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

Shelby County must compete against other counties within and outside of the state of Tennessee for new businesses. To successfully compete often requires offering companies incentives such as tax abatements or infrastructure improvements. I am not opposed to this support, but I argue that it is not the only form of incentives. Shelby County is rich in our diversity and natural resources and we must find ways to play on these strengths as well.

It is important that we focus on selling an entire package and not selling ourselves short. These incentives must be fixed to real job creation that offers a livable wage for local residents. Incentives for warehouses are not where our tax dollars should be spent to stimulate our economy. Additionally, rapid approval for new developments outside of the smart growth model is not an effective approach, as these developments may become new tax burdens for our citizens without proper planning and oversight.

We should also not forget those businesses that are homegrown. Offering incentives for hiring from within the community, for exterior improvements, and expansion is a good investment.

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

The challenges that the MED is facing are well known and need to be addressed, but my concerns stretch far beyond the MED. When we talk about financing and public health options, keep in mind that we are servicing individuals who use the emergency room as their primary doctor because they have no other choice. It will be critical for Shelby County to direct its attention toward providing preventive care options and increasing the number of care-providers and clinics in areas where attention is most needed. Shelby County has the highest infant mortality rate in the entire country. In Memphis the highest percentage of infant mortality cases is found in the 38106 zip code, which are neighborhoods found in District 2. Seeing a critical need to address this alarming statistic, in 2009, I raised close to a million dollars to build a resource center to provide pre- and post natal mothers with needed preventive services. This facility, which is called **TheMOTHERCenter** will provide mothers with free medical examinations, nutritional

guidance, and social resource assistance. I am proud to state that we are prepared to break ground on the Center in this summer of 2010.

Lastly, I believe that an additional solution to address financing of the MED includes a firm agreement between local government officials and elected leaders in neighboring counties and states that utilize MED services to cover a percentage of the costs associated with services provided to residents outside of Shelby County. Each year the MED spends 24 million dollars providing services to indigent clients from Arkansas and Mississippi. This can not continue. These states must pay their fair share and Shelby County should use all legal means possible to correct this loss.

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

I wish for people to remember me as a dedicated, ethical and honest man; someone who devoted his life to service and made a difference.