

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

Name: Steve Mulroy

District for which you are running: District 5

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.)**

I have served as County Commissioner for the last four years and have gained a wealth of experience in the role. I have tackled problems as diverse as Juvenile Court, the budget, adult businesses, ethics regulation, election reform, Operation Safe Community, single-source funding for education, the Med, and more. I have learned how to deal with the county bureaucracy and my fellow Commissioners.

In addition, I serve full-time as a law professor at the University of Memphis. This gives me an additional perspective on education as well as the formation and analysis of law and policy. Prior to that, I served as a federal prosecutor, which gives me perspective on law enforcement; and as a civil rights lawyer for the U.S. Justice Department, which gives me perspective on the civil rights issue which still resonate here in Shelby County.

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

I have always been interested in public policy and became active locally as a volunteer, grass roots group member, and pro bono attorney in various causes, including "paper trail" election reform and election protection work. This caused

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me to become recruited in 2006 to run as a Democrat in the “swing” district of District 5. I saw this as an opportunity to apply my skills to advance a progressive agenda in Shelby County, and agreed to run.

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?

+Saving the Regional Medical Center

+Consolidation

+Crime

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?

I would continue Mayor Wharton’s Debt Reduction Plan, which has caused the county debt to not only stop rising, but to start falling for the first time in well over a decade. This means continuing to put aside CIP funds for “pay as you go” and keeping tight limits on increases in bond debt for new construction. It also means being very careful not to approve new school construction unless it is truly necessary. The Needs Assessment Committee has done a good job in this regard and needs to continue. We need to stop building schools that follow the shift in population and be willing to redraw school attendance zones to use as much as possible the schools we already have. We also need to keep a high enough reserve balance so that the bond companies will continue to give Shelby County the high rating it now has. We can afford to dip into reserves one time for an immediate crisis like the Med but after that we should leave the reserve fund alone.

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?

I support “single source funding” for the schools. This is the plan agreed to by the Joint Committee on Educational Funding Solutions (of which I was a member), which met for over 6 months last year. Under this plan, the county would take over all local (non-state and non-federal) funding responsibility for the MCS and SCS systems. A per-student formula could be worked out between MCS and SCS based on the number of special needs/ESL/SES-challenged students in the systems, and the “money would follow the students,” without

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arbitrary distinctions between “county students” and “city students,” because all students in Shelby County deserve an equal educational opportunity. There would be a multi-year transition period in which the county would “ramp up” its funding while the City “ramps down.” Additionally, the City would be required to take all the savings from this transition and put it into a tax cut for City residents.

- 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?**

I favor “smart growth” policies. I am a believer in the “New Urbanism” philosophy, where land use policy is designed to discourage suburban sprawl and automobile-based development, and instead incentivize high-density development “inside the loop” which are walkable and bikeable. To this end, I support the new Unified Development Code. On a related note, Mayor Ford’s Public Works Task Force, which I currently chair, is actively exploring ways that the CIP budget can be used in selected city neighborhoods to slow traffic, include bike lanes, plant trees, and do other things to push them in this direction and encourage commercial development. I also think we need to continue to do more creative things to incentivize development in the inner city, particularly blighted neighborhoods. I am also exploring legislation which would require a registry of vacant properties, with local contacts, and would impose fees which escalate the longer the properties stay vacant.

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 to economic growth in Shelby County today is the perception (grounded in reality, but perhaps sometimes exaggerated) that large parts of Shelby County are unsafe. The County Commission can and should continue to fund the components of the Operation Safe Community plan, including hiring more prosecutors so we can implement “vertical prosecution” (where prosecutors follow the same case from beginning to end).

The second greatest obstacle is our fragmented local government system, where out of town companies considering establishing venues here have to jump through time-consuming bureaucratic hoops of Memphis, Shelby County, and suburban governments. This is one of the most compelling arguments for Metro consolidation. To reduce this impediment, the County Commission can and should do all it can to support Metro consolidation.

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

Such incentives are a necessary evil. Other jurisdictions offer them, so, to be competitive, we have to as well. Most of the time, they end up being good investments: the jobs, economic activity and tax revenue that result from corporate expansions within Shelby County, or relocations to Shelby County, are greater than the deferred tax revenue we granted initially.

I served for a time on the PILOT subcommittee of the Industrial Development Board, and saw first-hand how these calculations are made. The PILOT reforms implemented back in 2006 were useful steps to curb over-generous grants of PILOTs, but in some instances they went too far. We “reformed the reforms” last year at the request of the Chamber of Commerce, which reported time and again that corporations considering relocating to Shelby County gave the new requirements as reasons for rejecting Shelby County. To be more specific, while I have always supported the living wage and racial diversity factors involved in the current PILOT program, there were other requirements, like the residency requirements, that ended up being too onerous.

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

Of course, we should be doing everything we can to get more help from the federal government, and to get Arkansas and Mississippi to contribute more to pay for the many Arkansans and Mississippians who get treatment at The Med. But by far the most important goal is to get Nashville to pay us back more of what we contribute toward state funding. Nashville gives us back only about a third of what it receives from the federal government in uncompensated care reimbursements, so we in Memphis are essentially subsidizing other hospitals in Tennessee—hospitals which aren’t on the verge of failure, and whose service populations cannot be any needier than ours. Additionally, there is merit to the current proposal for a hospital “bed tax” on private hospitals to support the Med. The fact that the state Hospital Association supports the measure gives it some hope (though not a lot) that it will pass.

All of the above sounds great, but are all forms of hoping that other entities over whom we have no control will come to our rescue. We in Shelby County government have to be ready to do whatever it takes to keep the Med open and operating at full capacity, because it is a crucial safety net for the needy among us. That’s why I supported increasing the county’s contribution by \$10 million a year. In future years, we may need to either lay off employees or raise taxes to be able to do this on a permanent basis. We need to be prepared to do this.

Regarding “public health options,” if the question refers to the need to keep The Med open as a refuge for people who can’t afford to pay for treatment, the above indicates my strong endorsement of this need. More generally, at the federal level, I

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favor universal health care including a strong “public option.” Universality is justified both as a moral imperative—we fund universal public education, and isn’t health just as basic as education? ---and also as a matter of economic necessity, because the percentage of our GDP devoted to health care is unacceptably high and rising. Having everyone covered with basic preventative care, and reducing the number of unnecessary emergency room visits, will help our bottom line over the long haul. In my view, a “public option” is important to achieving this goal, because it will provide competitive pressure on private insurance companies to keep rates affordable and services flexible.

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

I can already claim as a legacy the County’s first living wage, prevailing wage, gay rights, and seniors’ property tax freeze legislation. Going forward, a non-exhaustive wish list might include presiding over a transition to (a) a streamlined, equitable consolidated government with (b) “paper trail” voting, instant runoffs, and other signs of election reform; a lowered crime rate; a significant spike in inner-city development; and bringing Shelby County further into the 21st century on matters involving the GLBT community.

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