

COALITION FOR A BETTER MEMPHIS
Shelby County Commissioner Candidate Questionnaire
Election Date: May 6, 2014

**AN ELECTRONIC VERSION OF THIS FILE CAN BE RECEIVED BY SENDING AN EMAIL
TO peggy@bettermemphis.org**

Name: Donnell Cobbins

District for which you are running: District 11

Section 1: Qualifications and Background (2 questions)

Section 2: Vision and Strategies (4 questions)

Section 3: Improving the System of Government (4 questions)

1. QUALIFICATIONS AND BACKGROUND

1. Describe your qualifications for holding the office of Shelby County Commissioner.

I have several 20 years of administrative, business management and community service experience here in Memphis:

- Director of Site Operations – Sitel Corp. 2005-2008
- Vice President/COO Universal Commercial Real Estate 2008-Present
- Joint Mayoral Appointee – Downtown Parking Authority
- 2011 Fellow, New Memphis Institute
- Co-Founder of the Universal Commercial M/WMBE Power Breakfast
- 1990 Alumnus of Memphis University School and Kemper Military College, Boonville, MO
- Resident of District 11 for 18 years

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

The residents of Fox Meadows, Parkway Village, Oakhaven & Whitehaven have never had representation specific to our area on the County Commission.

Having resided within the limits of District 11 for nearly 20 years, my family and I have personally experienced the transition of our community. I share

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in the concern and understand the issues that most the voters of District 11. I am committed to District 11 not only as a candidate for commissioner, but as a husband, father, and concerned citizen as well.

Furthermore, I desire the opportunity to shape public policy for Shelby County by listening to business, residential and community constituents in order to shape and advocate for policies that have a positive impact for all of Shelby County.

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. The three most significant challenges facing Shelby county in the next four years are

a. Education

- i. A most recent statistic informed the public that only 28% of third grade students read on a third grade level. I have a third grade daughter and to think that as a SCS student she has less than a thirty percent chance of reading at grade level is unconscionable. As County Commissioner, I would tie strong accountability measures to any request to increased funding for SCS. I would encourage my colleagues to insist that any additional funding for SCS be contingent upon the development of an action plan that addresses this reprehensive disparity. The plan would be required to include specific measurable goals. In addition, our schools system is ground zero for education reform in the United States. The County Commission must ensure that as this new structure evolves that adequate resources are available to the system, so that student achievement remain at the forefront and that quality education for all children in Shelby County is a top priority.

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b. Efficiency in Government

- i. Shelby County finds itself in a precarious position with regard to its budget and looming debt. Whenever my family finds itself spending more than we take in, we do two things:
 1. **We find ways to stream line our operations.** Whether it would be to cut back on the number of cable channels or the number of time each week that we eat out, we determine areas within our household budget to decrease expenditures. When I am elected as County Commissioner, I will join my colleagues in seeking efficiencies in the County Government's budget expenses and apply that surplus to paying down the County Debt. Zero-based budgeting allows for this to occur, whereby every expense must be justified and agreed to on an annual basis.
 2. **We find ways to increase revenue.** Oftentimes, when my family has found itself in a cash crunch, we also look for additional income opportunities. I may take a second job or ask for additional hours at work. Shelby County Government must look for additional funding sources for County Government operations. Raising property taxes should not always be the answer. City of Memphis residents are the most taxed in Tennessee. We must identify areas of opportunity to grow our tax base without placing an unfair burden upon Shelby County taxpayers.

c. Economic Development

- i. In order to spur economic growth in Shelby County, it is required that we have a highly skilled workforce trained in the types of industries that are attracted to Memphis & Shelby County. To that end, I would propose that the commission

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encourage and foster a more collaborative effort between Economic Development Growth Engine of Memphis & Shelby County (EDGE) and the Workforce Investment Network (WIN). For example, those companies applying for a PILOT could be asked to contribute to a fund that that supports job training through the WIN. The WIN program would develop additional training opportunities fulfilling industrial job-readiness requirements for unemployed and underemployed Shelby Countians that suit the needs of major employers in the area.

- 2. How would you recommend we continue to pay down County debt and still fulfill the financial obligations of the County? What budget priorities must take precedence?**

When households find themselves in a cash crunch, they do two things: reduce household expenses and find additional opportunities to increase revenue. As we are saddled with a 1.1 billion dollar budget, we must do the same. I will work with my colleagues encouraging them as a body to request each department reduce their budget by 5%.

Additionally, we must look to put blighted housing back on the County tax rolls by supporting the plan to allow CDC's to purchase blighted and abandoned housing for the taxes owed and refund the amount to the same organization. The CDC will renovate and sell the house thereby returning the property to the tax rolls. We would then apply the surplus to paying down the County debt.

- 3. What are your views regarding the best way to fund public education of Shelby County and Memphis children?**

I believe that the best way to fund public education, would be to tie strong accountability measures to any funding because increase approved by the County Commission. The Commission's only obligation is to fund schools at the same level as the year prior. Therefore, an increase in funding should be tied to performance improvement. Consequently, if performance improvement goals are not met, then the SCS administration should be

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mandated to present an action plan with specific and measurable goals that address deficiencies.

Additionally, the County Commission should look to fund Pre-K education for SCS schools students.

- 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 am a strong proponent of Smart Growth planning. It allows for the creation of healthy businesses along with strong neighborhood communities. At the heart of Smart Growth, is the opportunity to build new housing with close access to transportation and schools. Implementing Smart Growth strategies will help to rebuild our neighborhoods while growing strong businesses which are the lifeblood of the Shelby County economy.

- 5. Are you satisfied with the economic growth (jobs and income) of Shelby County today? If not, what should the county government do to improve economic development efforts? What incentives would you support or oppose be used to attract future economic development?**

No, I am not satisfied with the economic growth of Shelby County. When elected to the County Commission, I will lead an effort to encourage more collaboration with EDGE and the Win program. When businesses apply for the tax reduction via the PILOT program, we should ask those businesses to make a contribution to the WIN program. The WIN program would use those funds to implement more skills based training geared toward fulfilling industrial job-readiness requirements for unemployed and underemployed Shelby Countians

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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 lack of an investment in inner-city Memphis represents one of the greatest obstacles to economic growth in Shelby County. Because we have neglected inner-city Memphis, an underground economy of crime and drugs has taken root and has strong hold on the inner city. I believe that if we invest in industrial job-readiness training for residents of inner city Memphis, specifically, we will create an opportunity to dismantle the underground economy of crime and drugs. It is very seldom that a gainfully employed individual plans to commit a crime when he leaves his place of employment. As was stated earlier, encouraging the collaboration between the WIN program and EDGE would fund job-readiness training that will fuel the growth of our economy by training our workforce for the types of industries that are attracted to Shelby County.

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

I am a proponent of offering incentives to companies considering major new investments in Shelby County. I would lead the Commission in fostering a more collaborative effort between EDGE and the WIN program. We would encourage EDGE to tie the PILOT awards to grants to the WIN program to further fund job readiness programs.

- 3. What is your position on consolidation of city and county governments?**

I believe that the consolidation of city and county governments is a worthwhile pursuit and ultimately will become a reality. As was stated earlier, the double taxation of Memphis city residents is inhibiting the economic growth of our region. Furthermore, I believe it is blatantly unfair to Memphis residents. The dual form of governments in Shelby County makes it difficult for industries looking to invest in Memphis to do business

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here. These potential business partners have to get approvals from two legislative bodies in order to get anything done.

The consolidation of these two governments would make it easier for industry to invest in and bring jobs to Memphis and Shelby County

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

I would hope that my legacy as a commissioner would be that Donnell Cobbins influenced and encouraged his colleagues on the County Commission to implement public policy that led to helping Memphis become a city of choice for new industry and new residents, and the retention of existing industry and residents. When my service is complete, I would hope that there will be visible, measurable, sustainable strategies and policies that improved our community and contributed to making Memphis and Shelby County a great place to live.

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