

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: Taylor Berger _____

District for which you are running: _____ 5 _____

Section 1: Qualifications and Background (2 questions)

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1. QUALIFICATIONS AND BACKGROUND

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

I am an attorney turned small business owner and entrepreneur, which makes me a relentless problem solver. Crafting solutions to complex issues is what I'm good at and what I love to do. My success in this stems from my curiosity and imagination. I tend to look at things differently, pulling together diverse perspectives and understanding relationships between issues that at first appear disparate. I'm a consensus builder. I listen to people, and can relate to most everyone I meet. Humility allows me to work with others' motivations and goals to craft compromise.

These character traits and skills will serve me well on the County Commission. I do not bring a stiff ideological agenda with me. I am running as a Democrat but with substantial Republican support because of my pragmatic approach to issues. As an attorney I learned that listening to each side of an argument with an open mind yields the best result. Some may think I am naïve to think I can help change the tenor of the Commission by practicing kindness and keeping a positive attitude. I believe that at least here on the local level we should be able to agree on certain things. We have to put ego aside and focus on building the city. We have to listen to the boots on the ground: the businesses, neighborhoods and nonprofits that toil everyday with real issues. By listening we can understand the problems. That is the first step to finding real solutions, and what I can bring to the Commission.

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

Three things happened over the past few months that led me to a decision to run for Shelby County Commission.

1. The universal pre-kindergarten ballot measure failed. That was an incredibly sad day for the families who lack access to this crucial first step in education and life success. It also showed how little trust voters have in our local government. I want to change both these things.

2. I had a meeting with Phil Trenary, a fellow entrepreneur and business owner who the Chamber's

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Chairman's Circle has hired to coordinate their five moon missions for Memphis. He and I share a vision for cooperation between business, government and the non-profit sector that I think will move Memphis into a new age of prosperity.

3. I started an initiative called Make Memphis. It began as a response to the undercurrent of negativity swirling around our city. There are so many good people doing great things in Memphis that I felt we needed a forum to showcase that and help people turn good ideas into projects. We need results now, and the enthusiasm and success of Make Memphis shows that we are ready to turn the corner as a city.

As a business owner, lawyer and civic activist I have made it my job to unite people and solve problems. I get things done. I'm ready to become part of the solution.

I have founded multiple businesses since moving home five years ago, so on a personal level I understand the value small business owners bring to city. I believe local government and business must work together to ensure success for the city as a whole.

I have founded several non-profits and sit on multiple boards. In that work I have been inspired by the tremendous amount of goodwill and innovative work being done every day in the community. It has also helped me understand that we still need more resources and connections between what is available.

My work as a tax attorney helped me understand the complex relationships between the branches of government and the legislative branch's role in shaping policy.

As a father of two, I am personally invested in the success of the unified school district.

My background as an entrepreneur, attorney and civic activist has prepared me to represent my neighbors and city on the Shelby County Commission. I have the passion to lead, and the relentless focus to get things done. I take a practical approach to solving every problem, and create solutions that work.

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?

With the unified school district and the national spotlight on Shelby County we have the opportunity to change how we educate, from pre-kindergarten through high school and into college or vocational-technical training. As a County Commissioner I would lead in this realm. I would work with our elected school board, community leaders, teachers and students, ensuring that education is funded, effective and efficient.

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Public health includes oversight of Regional One Health and its expansion, addressing infant mortality, policies to reduce blight, make streets pedestrian and bicycle-friendly and improving public access to green space. While significant headway has been made in each of these areas, they will continue to present challenges and opportunities over the next four years. Our local response to the Affordable Care Act could put Regional One Health in a much stronger financial position as the number of insured patients increases. If we leverage that to improve outreach in areas including preventative and prenatal care we can significantly improve public health. If the state attorney general approves the recent “tax dead” parcel initiative we have a unique opportunity to improve neighborhoods. Finally, we must keep up the momentum we have with Greenprint and similar initiatives to keep moving the county forward as a healthy, desirable place to live.

Economic development is broad area that includes business incentives such as the PILOT program, workforce development and vocational-technical training, taxes and education. As a business owner I know firsthand the challenges faced by entrepreneurs and operators in Shelby County. I’ve struggled through the layers of county and municipal bureaucracy. I’ve written blogs to explain to others the myriad permits, licenses and tax obligations new business owners have to navigate. I’ve passed up public and Chamber resources because I felt they were probably more trouble than they were worth. I’ve struggled to find qualified employees and to train them properly. These are the kind of things we must address if we are going to attract and retain talented people and growing companies in Shelby County. As someone who has been through it multiple times and continues to build new businesses and create new relationships, I am uniquely prepared to help.

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?

Recent efficiency studies must be used to minimize waste and eliminate redundancies so County government can continue to pay down debt while retaining high service capacity. We must continue to abide the pay-as-you-go model for smaller projects whenever possible, to reduce reliance on bond debt. The schools, courts and public safety must be given highest priority, but must all go through rigorous study to improve efficiency.

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

There is no silver bullet here. Funding public education is a massive obligation and property tax revenue will not keep up. We have to leverage state and federal dollars to supplement, and lobby for more. I think we should reintroduce the recent ballot initiative to increase sales tax to fund pre-kindergarten, but do so with a much clearer plan and public information campaign.

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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?**

When I drive around the city, I cannot help but think there is no reason to ever build a new building. We have an enormous inventory of residential, office, retail and industrial space in Shelby County. It defies common sense to think we’d ever need to build more, especially considering the immense cost to build new infrastructure to serve new development. Our general policy should be to do everything within our power to encourage revitalization of existing development.

- 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?**

The most effective means to move citizens from unemployment to employment include training and job opportunity. I believe that most people want to work. It has to start with access to a good education in childhood. We must have smart programs in high school that steer people toward either vocational-technical training or college depending on their inclinations. What if I can tell you when you are 15 that if you stick it out and do well you can be making \$30,000 out of high school? If you go through two more years of training you can make \$50,000 at the age of 20? That is the kind narrative we must offer our children, and it has to be true. For those older workers who are laid off or chronically unemployed, the Workforce Investment Network must work for them. It has to give them the right skills and the right resources, quickly and efficiently. There must be a light at the end of the tunnel, and the tunnel has to be well lit and easy to find.

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?**

Businesses need to feel comfortable. Local and prospective companies must perceive the Chamber and local government as a well-oiled machine ready to help. We must have a clear narrative that we are the best place to do business. This narrative needs to be about the intrinsic value of our region: the history of innovation, quality of life, low taxes and costs, quality of life, pure water, geography, roads, rails, river and runways. Yes we can talk about incentives and workforce development programs, but first companies have to feel that we are good place to locate and that our government is stable and prudent. I’m not so sure companies have that warm fuzzy feeling yet, but I can help. I understand on a personal level what matters, and faith in elected officials is crucial. Companies must see business leaders in office, working seamlessly with the Chamber to improve the economic climate of our region.

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

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I support the limited use of incentives to attract companies who desire to locate or expand their operations in our community. I question the targeting of industrial companies that require massive incentives and substantial workforce development when the jobs they bring are often low-skill, low-wage. We should spread our incentives around knowledge-based companies in the medical, tech and logistics areas that pay higher wages and find real value in being in Memphis because of its location. This ties into recalibrating our educational system around STEM to prepare our children for careers in these high value fields.

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

I support city/county government consolidation. It has worked well in other cities across the southeast. It would reduce distraction and in-fighting between the county and city. It would improve the way companies and neighborhoods communicate with government by simplifying the process. Over time, it would increase efficiency and save money by eliminating duplicative bureaucracy.

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

I want to change the Commission's current reputation as a dysfunctional, poisonous group more interested in ego building and control than progress. I want to be remembered as the one who reached across party lines to move the County forward. I want to help the Commission work better with the Chamber and City Council. I want to be the uniter.

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