

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

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TO [peggy@bettermemphis.org](mailto:peggy@bettermemphis.org)**

Name: VAN DAVIS TURNER, JR.

District for which you are running: DISTRICT 12

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Section 1: Qualifications and Background (2 questions)

Section 2: Vision and Strategies (4 questions)

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

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<b>1. QUALIFICATIONS AND BACKGROUND</b>
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**1. Describe your qualifications for holding the office of Shelby County Commissioner.**

I believe that my past work experiences such as serving as Associate General Counsel for the Memphis City Schools and my involvement in organizations like the NAACP-Memphis Branch and the Economic Club of Memphis have afforded me a diverse perspective of our community and prepared me to make sound policy decisions.

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

As a young man, I observed my cousin's election to become the first African-American to represent District 31 in Sunflower County, Mississippi. He had a slogan: "From the cotton fields to Capitol Hill!" I was awe-inspired. I saw how his candidacy and platform literally lifted an entire community and gave it pride and hope. From that point forward, I became a believer in the transformative role of public service, and I knew that I wanted to make a difference like my cousin.

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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?**

The three greatest issues are education funding, public safety and job growth. First, we have to continue to make sure we stay focused on providing adequate funding to ensure a world-class education for every student in the Shelby County Schools. I would like to see Universal Pre-K for all students in the Shelby County Schools. Second, we just recently had approximately 19 violent criminal acts committed last week ending in serious injury or death. We have to make sure that we are doing everything possible to protect our citizens. Further, once we incarcerate an individual, we have to make sure that we are doing everything possible to keep that individual from returning to the penal farm. This means we have to focus on educating these individuals, assisting with employment opportunities, and supporting dependency rehabilitation efforts when appropriate. Third, aggressive job growth is an absolute must. When we put citizens to work, we stabilize families, we reduce crime, and we create better communities. We must continue to attract new businesses and industries to Shelby County, and we must continue to demand that these businesses, once here, hire locally and diversely.

**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?**

I think we focus on bringing in new industry to neutralize and increase the county's shrinking tax base. I also think that focusing on education will increase the skill sets and job readiness of citizens in the county to be ready to avail themselves of these opportunities. Increased job opportunities with a job-ready workforce would result in a surplus that could be used to pay down the County debit while still fulfilling the County's financial obligations.

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

I think we put the pressure on the Tennessee General Assembly to increase funding. Adequate funding for education must become a priority and one of the County's top three legislative items. While some communities are experiencing problems with underutilized schools, the schools in District 12, Southeast Shelby County, are overflowing and filled to capacity. With the "maintenance of effort" rule in effect, all the state is required to do is to maintain what it has done in the past. Even with the significant budget cuts by Superintendent Hopson, we still have a shortfall. Hence, increased funding from the state is an absolute must. I would also continue to approach the business community for its support as well. They have already done a lot, but we should ask to see if they are willing to do more. We certainly need it.

**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?**

Yes, I believe Shelby County should have a general "smart growth" policy. I think the policy should focus on creating sustainable communities. We need communities that will be here and thriving 50 years from now. We do that by making sure communities have strong schools, parks and green spaces, grocery stores and other amenities which sustain and support are community.

**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, and I think that we can do better. I think we need to embrace federal grant programs and other tools such as PILOTS to continue attracting industry and business to Shelby County. I know that tax abatements are not well-liked and to say that it is a flawless system would ignore reality. However, it's all we have right now, and it works. I am open to other incentives that do not grant tax abatements, but right now, we need to work with what we have, improve it, and demand results.

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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?**

**We have to focus on a better educated and technically-savvy workforce. We have to work to meet the workforce needs of companies moving into town. I am a big proponent of developing a school curriculum which mirrors workforce necessity. This will directly ensure that we are training individuals to meet a workforce need. Thus, supporting education and retraining programs for existing employees is perhaps the number one economic development activity that is most essential to removing barriers for economic growth in Shelby County. I think the Commission' support of education and specifically, programs which marry school curriculum to workforce necessity is what can be done.**

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

**As stated before, it is something that we must utilize right now. Is it perfect? No. However, we have to compete with growing and burgeoning communities in Little Rock, Arkansas, Jackson, Mississippi and Nashville, Tennessee. Again, I am open to other incentives that do not grant tax abatements, but right now, we need to work with what we have, improve it, and demand results.**

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

**I don't think the County can force a consolidation. It would be up to the City to give up its Charter or the people to vote in favor of it. However, if it happens, I think we would have to carefully and strategically plan how we integrate systems and deal with the merger. As we have all observed the school merger, it will not be an easy task, but if faced with a merger or consolidation, I would be willing to roll my sleeves up and make it work.**

SHELBY COUNTY COMMISSIONER CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE

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

**I would want my legacy to be that I made a difference with education. Education is so critical to this community. It affects everything in some capacity. If I, as a commissioner, would have improved how we fund education, think about education and support education, I think that I would have left a great legacy of service.**

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