

## **2008 BizPac Interviews**

### **Huntsville Mayor/City Council Candidate Survey Questions**

#### ***1. Why are you running for this office and what do you hope to accomplish during the next four years?***

I supported the current mayor of Huntsville for the past three terms, but I have been concerned by the turn of events in recent years. As a former councilmember and active community leader, I am concerned over the lack of leadership and accountability shown in the present administration.

As mayor of Huntsville, I welcome the opportunity to provide the leadership and accountability that are vital to address the challenges that face our city, particularly as they relate to growth in the coming years. I am not certain that our citizens are aware that Huntsville is well behind in providing the infrastructure for a successful BRAC transition. We have not properly managed the growth that has already occurred, and we are not prepared for the demands that lie ahead. As a city with limited resources, we simply cannot afford any more catastrophes like the mismanaged jail project. The \$40- to \$50-million in cost overruns (for a \$30 million project) could have been paired with state and federal money that would have provided hundreds of millions of dollars in new infrastructure. I believe my years of experience as a businessman and community leader will be an asset in proactive planning and in making fiscally responsible decisions.

After elected, my first initiative will be to reorganize and improve the efficiency of the existing departments in city hall. We have had the same management structure for the past 30 years, and it is no longer serving us well. The city has hit gridlock in its ability to respond swiftly and efficiently and to get projects through the system in a timely fashion. We need our city officials working with us—not against us—through open and honest leadership that respects and hears the voice of our citizens. To that end, within the first 45 days after the election, I plan to work with city leadership to assess the function and efficiency of each department and to realign or restructure the respective areas of responsibility. While broad organizational changes will likely take up to two years, I believe the first 45 days will ensure the proper focus and improve the ability to get things done.

My second initiative has to be roads. The Memorial Parkway project has been a prolonged nightmare for more than a decade, and the bungling of the Four Mile Post extension over the mountain to Hampton Cove has left the city with an inadequate two-lane, congested road. The transportation study on the impact of BRAC on the community clearly points out specific roads that must be widened or improved, and it listed new roads that must be constructed. This has not happened, and we have yet to identify all the resources for these projects. I am disturbed that the city chose to redirect road monies from the 2012 budget to purchase the Rescue Mission's property on Seminole Drive. The city also diverted another \$3 million to pay for a new service road to the Von Braun Center and millions of dollars for a bridge at Church Street. We need a community consensus on road priorities and strategies for funding for the next three to five years, and that consensus must include representatives from the Madison County Commission, the Huntsville City Council, and the Alabama State Legislature. As the third largest city in the state and one of its fastest growing, we believe we are woefully under-funded. But, all the complaining and finger pointing won't change a thing until we have a solid road plan in place with clearly identified viable funding, and we make the commitment to communicate this plan to our state partners. This includes taking the time to build lasting relationships with state leaders who sign the checks and administer the projects. We should also meet with each of the candidates for governor, lieutenant governor and the legislature to secure their endorsement for our road plan.

My third priority will be to focus on jobs. There is so much elation over BRAC's decision to move some of its functions to Huntsville that we lose sight of the fact that these jobs are dependent on federal funding. What Washington gives, it can take away. While we certainly want to maximize the gains from BRAC, we need to proactively work to diversify our economy to promote business outside the government procurement realm so that we are not dependent on the federal budget. The recent Biotech venture with Hudson Alpha is a good example of an entrepreneurial initiative that capitalized on the talent and resources available in Huntsville. I believe another natural area for Huntsville business to explore would be sustainable energy sources.

***2. Do you see a need for a long-range vision for Huntsville and/or Madison County? If so, how should it be developed?***

Absolutely, Huntsville and Madison County will benefit from a shared vision and a strong working partnership. Many of our challenges and opportunities are closely aligned, and we can save our taxpayers money and provide more progressive government by working together toward common goals. We should work in concert on infrastructure and services, roads, schools and in industrial recruitment. It is important that this vision be crafted by an inclusive group of stakeholders that includes business leaders, educators, citizens groups and representatives from the various city, county and state governments. While the focus is Huntsville/Madison County, these leaders should be tasked with shaping a regional plan that includes input and responsibility from each of the outlying entities. The key is to identify and support a broad plan that will address the "big picture" issues while still allowing the numerous communities and neighborhood associations the ability to shape and lead their own vision for quality of life.

***3. What do you believe is the Mayor/City Council's role in economic development? Do you believe it is appropriate for the County Commission to purchase land for future industrial parks?***

The role of local government in economic development is multifaceted. We help to create the climate for a healthy economy. From the process of issuing a business license or a building permit, to zoning and planning policies, police and fire protection—a healthy city government provides the basic public services that support a dynamic business community. Companies and entrepreneurs look at numerous factors when they select a city including infrastructure, transportation, utilities, property taxes and schools. Poor marks in any of these areas can drop a community from contention.

My hope would be that city and community leaders could sit down and talk about the kind of companies and economic development that that would best benefit the area. As I stated earlier, we need to diversify our employment sector and attract companies that are not dependent on federal dollars for contracts.

We will face challenges in the near future with regard to available land for development. Huntsville and Madison County's research and industrial parks will be at capacity within the decade, and we will need to look at either expanding these parks or creating smaller "smart parks" dedicated to specific industries.

***4. Do you support strategic marketing and incentives such as TIFs to stimulate retail/sales tax development? If so, what is your vision for this effort?***

The success of the city's recent TIFs seems to have led to TIF-fever, and that could be a dangerous thing. We are already earmarking so much of our sales tax on these TIF-supported capital projects that we must proceed with future proposals very carefully. All it takes is one bad TIF to jeopardize the financial health of our city. I prefer to use TIFs sparingly and judiciously to build schools or to provide infrastructure that is essential to the city's long-range plan. Otherwise, I don't think it is in our best financial interest to increasingly depend on sales tax revenues to pay for non-essential projects that would not be economically viable on their own through private investment.

***5. What strategic steps should the City take over the next four years to expand and strengthen long-term revenue sources?***

If you look at the City of Huntsville's budget you will see the major two sources of revenue are sales and property taxes, with sales taxes comprising about 60 percent of the annual budget. I am a proponent of controlled annexation and expansion, which when properly managed will enhance our tax base, and hopefully enable us to be less dependent on sales tax revenues. But the key to sound fiscal management is to make sure we don't let our spending outpace our growth in revenue.

***6. Do you support efforts to better attract and retain the young, professional workforce to this community to fill advanced technology and other jobs? Do you have additional ideas to strengthen these efforts?***

The ability to attract and retain a young, professional workforce is essential for a community that hangs its hat on its well-educated, high-tech employment base. We need to address the factors that matter to young professionals. Foremost is quality of life, and that includes everything from a vibrant night life to green parks, bike trails, running paths, and recreational opportunities. Affordable housing, a flourishing arts scene and continued education are also important. Look at any successful 'hip' city and you will find thriving universities, a multitude of artistic venues, and unique living opportunities that often include downtown living, loft apartments and condominiums. To facilitate entrepreneurship, the city should examine the ease of establishing new businesses and streamline its procedures to minimize bureaucracy. Young professionals should be encouraged to volunteer in the community, serve in leadership positions, run for public office, and ultimately help shape the Huntsville of the future.

***7. Do you support the efforts of Big Spring Partners to stimulate downtown development with zoning and code changes, strategic master planning, redevelopment of private and government property, and other initiatives? Do you believe it is appropriate for the city to provide infrastructure improvements that will stimulate additional downtown development?***

I support any organization or public-private venture that will help revitalize downtown in accordance with an accepted master plan. Specifically, we need a master plan that supports a shared vision of a downtown that preserves its historic structures, supports economic development, offers affordable housing, and protects and promotes green space. Building codes, zoning, planning and engineering all must be addressed to create a workable solution, and citizens must be heard and included in the planning process. Downtown needs affordable housing where medical and office assistants, young accountants and other professionals can live and even walk to work if they choose. The city can and should take a leadership role

in providing the appropriate infrastructure to stimulate downtown development in accordance with the master plan, its funding guidelines and timeline.

***8. What do you believe is the Mayor/City Council's role in public education?***

Because the Huntsville City School Board has no direct taxing power, members must work closely with City Hall to fund needed improvements. Technically, the city's role is to provide capital on an "as needed" basis and to provide community support for individual schools. But, consider what has happened in the last decade to our city schools. In the 1980s Huntsville was the "residential king" because of its highly regarded school system. In the 1990s the Madison County School system embarked on an extensive building program, and new housing developments rapidly followed the latest and best facilities. As Huntsville's campuses continued to age, Madison County's looked new and prosperous. The fallout from eroding enrollment and inadequate facilities led a task force to recently recommend that Huntsville close and consolidate **XXX** schools and construct **XX** new ones. I believe it is critical for city hall and the school board to work together to ensure that we are proactive rather than reactive in addressing the needs of our schools.

***9. How would you work to improve cooperation between the Mayor and the City Council and within the City Council?***

When I was elected to the City Council in 1988, I was full of energy and new ideas. Yet, I quickly realized that established leadership had no interest in hearing from a 28-year-old upstart. I forged ahead and learned a great deal about the politics of city government, including that "silos" in city hall do not allow for open, responsive government. That is what I believe we are encountering today.

As mayor, I pledge to have more communication with council members. To begin, I believe the mayor and council should have a strategic planning retreat once a year where we hammer out priorities and objectives. This shared vision will help us understand our goals and the most pressing needs of our constituents. Ongoing dialogue is essential, and all parties should be kept abreast of new initiatives and concerns. Council members should be able to trust that their voice will be heard. In addition, I would like to propose that we take city council meetings on the road five times year—once in each district—where citizens would have easier access to attend. We could also spend a portion of that session in a town hall forum, hearing from the public about issues or concerns that pertain to their particular district.

***10. How would you work to improve cooperation with Huntsville, Madison and Madison County government entities? What opportunities do you see for shared services to improve our quality of life?***

I told one of the Madison mayoral candidates that if he and I won the upcoming election we would buy a shiny new hatchet and bury it on the Huntsville Madison line. The petty infighting is counter productive, and I am convinced that it has severely hampered our efforts to secure road funding in Montgomery. We may have won the "annexation war" but we lost the battle for roads.

Huntsville is not an island, and we need to think more broadly, more regionally, as we move to solve our challenges and to create opportunities that will ultimately benefit the entire Tennessee Valley. Shared services are a necessity to maximize finite tax dollars. Louisville, Kentucky took the bold action to combine its city and county school systems before it finalized the vote to create a metro government. Many

services have the potential to be combined. It is unfortunate that the new city-county jail, Huntsville's first major venture into a joint partnership with Madison County, has resulted in a financial fiasco.

***11. How would you work to stimulate state government support for local projects?***

First, we focus on relationships. You can't build support if you don't take the effort to understand the people, the system, the opportunities and the pitfalls that exist in Montgomery. The second is education. We need to take the time to properly inform our own legislative delegation about just how tilted our tax situation is with the state. We need to be purposeful and strategic in our efforts, to take advantage of election cycles and to speak with one voice. By working closely with regional leadership and identifying the projects that serve the greatest number of people, we add strength and credibility to our request.

***12. Do you support collective bargaining for public employees? If so, what do you see as the advantages of a public employee union?***

I believe that if you treat your employees right there is no need for a union, but I do not believe we need to have collective bargaining with City Employees.

***13. Give an example when you believe you did the right thing, but the decision may have cost you votes.***

In 1984, I served on Planning Commission when a young developer came forth with a plan to build residences on the slopes of Monte Sano Mountain. This planned unit development (PUD) was one of the first of its kind in Huntsville and called for cluster homes on the contours of the property at the end of Big Cove Road, below the Burritt Museum property. The plan would have saved a historic wagon trail, preserved green space, left the natural drainage of the mountain in place, and met ecological guidelines for slope development. The president of the Planning Commission, our current mayor, did not want the project and had the Covemont community rise up in opposition. I backed the development because I thought it was sound, and if the mountain was going to be developed this seemed the best possible approach. The project failed to get through Planning Commission, and two years later another developer built Governors Bend according to traditional zoning designed for flat land. Today, the historic wagon trail is gone, there is no dedicated green space, large single family homes loom on the mountainside, and drainage has intensified with traditional curbs and gutters. We have seen the problems of that slope development, and to this day I believe the community would have been better served with the original plan.