

Education Pac Questions for Board of Supervisors

1. What role do you see schools playing in making our community a desirable place to live?

I have learned from residents and business leaders alike that the local schools play many roles in our desirability as a community. The success of our graduates in higher education and their readiness to enter the workforce with the skills they need to understand and to master their new jobs creates the desire of investors and business owners to bring their companies here and raise their families here. Student success is often on a par with graduates of the private schools here.

2. As a Board member, how would you balance the need to fully fund our public schools and other government departments, with the taxpayers' desire for lower taxes. ***with some taxpayer's desire for lower taxes

I understand that the last several years of economic uncertainty have had a terrifying effect on many families in our County. People have lost jobs, had their hours cut, seen the values of their home investments or retirement savings shrink as the stock market drop and the banking crisis unfolded. Albemarle County also had to shrink its budget and its workforce.

Supervisors should find out what their voters think before making these dramatic budget decisions. What is the will of the majority? Is a supervisor representing their citizens' wishes? In 18 town halls in the last three + years I have listened to and discussed this issue and many others with residents of the White Hall district. For the last budget cycle, a huge majority of citizens of the White Hall district agreed with me that an equalized tax rate should be used, such that the same tax bill would be provided to the homeowner and at the same time, funds to begin to rebuild our local government investments in our future would be available

"Fully fund" is the challenge- what does that mean and how can we agree on the facts? The BOS and School Board have made some progress in understanding the tensions between the boards with regard to funding decisions, but in the last two years there has admittedly been no money to fight over.

I predict it is unlikely that the BOS will approve the amount requested by the School Superintendent as long as the School Board is perceived as a booster rather than an overseer of the school administration. Some perceptions linger: for example, the perception that the administration makes unilateral decisions without soliciting or accepting input or feedback, that they over-spend on technology which subsequently goes unused, that decisions are made without proper analysis of the consequences, that parents are demonized when they speak out against policies and policy changes that affect their children's school experience negatively, to name a few.

Important background for the budget question is the fact that, at a meeting in 2007, the BOS reduced the tax rate by six cents because of calls from a small cadre of citizens desiring to reduce all government. The debate during that meeting centered on the board's understanding that the economy was slowing, that property values would likely fall, and that much smaller budgets would be ahead without substantial tax rate increases.

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Forward thinking supervisors argued in favor of leaving the tax rate unchanged and saving the revenue generated, putting it into a rainy day fund for future uncertainty. Yet the majority chose to turn their backs on those facts and subsequently reduced the county revenue by millions.

The next year, 2008, I was faced with removing two cents of the tax rate from the capital category (which had been allocated to the capital fund for years) in order to maintain core services. The county began shrinking the workforce through attrition. Now we face a huge hole in our capital budget and many overdue projects, including the Crozet library, which, once built will be an educational asset for the schools as well.

3. Do you believe that it is the locality's responsibility to make up shortfalls in state funding?

In some cases but not all. The state will never live up to its obligations if localities continue to cover everything. It will take a change in the General Assembly to change their behavior. In matters of the safety net, increasing staff in social services and family support, I have voted to increase the budget for those, at the expense other programs.

4. What impact have the requirements of NCLB had on Albemarle County's budget?

My understanding is that the reporting and testing requirements have increased the operating costs significantly, requiring the hiring of specialized staff and purchase of lots of technology. I understand that the US Sec of Education is liberalizing the rules of NCLB. I would like the School Board to educate the BOS about this.

5. Do you support needs-based budgeting for the schools?

I support needs-based funding for classrooms and students, but not necessarily for administration. I still do not understand why so many assistant principals are needed when Ben Hurt and Julian King kept Albemarle High School under control with 1600 kids in 1967. This is another example where there is a lack of confidence.

6. What degree of responsibility do you accept for the success of Albemarle County Schools? How would you demonstrate that responsibility?

I support high performance standards for teachers, parents and students, and accountability of all of us for the decisions we make at all levels. Money is not always the solution to the question at hand. Although I am not part of the decision making team, I support a move away from the 4x4 schedule in the high schools and a return to the seven period day, with semesterization only when appropriate for the course, as the BOS was promised when the change was first made. When the budget situation improved in the spring of 2010, the laid off teachers should have been immediately rehired and the schedule changed back. Further, the scheduling software was a disaster, and another example that money is not always the solution. It is also an example of a lack of accountability.

7. How do you feel about the public input process during the budget cycle?

Should it be sooner and in smaller segments? Reactions to particular parts of the budget, rather than blanket statements about the entire budget might help. I thought that using the lens of economic development and an emphasis on business would be a way to focus board members on the importance of the schools. Yet BOS members did not listen to the business folks either.

I think that specific, story-based evidence on specific program efforts like the string program at Henley a couple of years ago, might be more effective to promote an understanding of the needs of the school system.

A list of investments and their results would help. For example, bus savings resulted from new technology, but this also resulted in a change to the pay rules, which was not fair to the drivers.

Live streaming of school board meetings by Charlottesville Tomorrow, if not happening already, would be a big improvement for helping people to keep informed, and would increase accountability to citizens.