

2026 Avery County Candidates Forum

Questions for the Board of Commissioners Candidates

Response of: Dillon S. Gentry

Vision & Priorities

1. Why are you running for Avery County Board of Commissioners, and what experiences prepare you for this role? *I am from Avery County. I have been here my whole life outside of time at App state and in the USMC. I believe that we are at an inflection point and the decisions we make today will determine the state of the area as a whole 15 years from now. I worry that my children will not be able to afford to live here, 15, 20 years from now (should they so choose) if current trends continue. Professionally I have worked in a vast array of sectors, from food and beverage, dishwasher, server, retail, consulting, landscaping, firearms instruction, carpentry, I am now a General Contractor. Since my time as an infantry squad leader in the U.S. Marine Corps, to now as a GC, I have years of experience working with and leading people (most of this work within Avery County). Therefore I feel well positioned to understand the perspective of the common local resident, and to advocate thusly.*

2. What are your top three priorities for Avery County in the next 4–6 years? *A healthy balance on net of local economic opportunity without sacrificing the unique culture that exists and has been inborn since the founding of the country.*

3. What's your long-term vision for Avery County's growth, and how will you balance development with preservation of local character? *My biggest and near sole intent is to preserve local character and culture.*

Community Needs & Service Delivery

4. Broadband internet access continues to exist as a significant local issue. If elected, how would you move forward on broadband expansion and public wi-fi access, ensuring sustainable funding and accountability? *I have unique relationships and connections within*

the telecom community that could be utilized to the advantage of the county. If elected, I would employ these relationships to advocate for the needs of our county.

5. What strategies do you support to improve access to health, senior, childcare and social services in the county — particularly in light of recent challenges for these community support systems following Helene? *I continue to be impressed with the way our county has pulled together following Helene. I have children enrolled in elementary school and daycare in this county and have seen the impact of how limited access to services affects working families, seniors and caregivers. I'm committed to identifying specifically what the holes are in these services and addressing them by leaning in to the existing agencies who have done a great job of advocating and serving these populations. These agencies need support- both financially and hands on - as they are stretched thin. Supporting them means appropriate funding and partnerships – reducing red tape, improving communication between agencies and utilizing available resources.*

6. How should the county address affordable housing, homes for the unhoused or those in subpar shelters, domestic violence support and other human-services needs, including use of grant funding or inter-agency partnerships? *The utilization of any available grants is always best practice. Additionally inter-agency and public-private partnerships are useful tools to combat these issues.*

7. How should the county improve child- and youth-oriented public services and spaces to protect and enrich the health, well-being and flourishing of children and teens in Avery County? *This is a demographic that is especially impressionable and responsive to the environment. The brain grows most rapidly from birth till age 5, benefiting from a nurturing, enriching environment. It*

continues to have developmental needs through the early 20s. A commitment to our youth is a commitment to our future. The county needs a place for these children to spend time. Our parks are great but we would significantly benefit from more indoor activity spaces.

8. How should the county help make this area more hospitable to youth and workforce ages so it can retain residents who strengthen the local economy and infrastructure? *You cannot retain young people to live here when it is economically impossible for them to do so. We must make this area more affordable to live in so that our young adults can practically survive but also find fulfillment. This ties back to the importance of affordable housing, reliable childcare and healthcare and strong pathways to sustainable employment. We need to involve young families in county decision*

making – when people feel heard, they are more likely to invest in their community.

9. Regarding schooling, how should the county bridge student performance gaps among various areas of the counties, helping at-risk populations thrive through equity measures (i.e. help that is tailored to the unique needs of each group)? Families should feel that they are receiving a great education regardless of which school their child is attending. This may mean adopting strategies with successful track records across the county.

Budget, Taxes & Economic Policy

10. How would you approach the county budget to balance essential services with property tax-impacts on residents? *I am of the wild belief that as a government or an individual you should not spend outside your means.*

11. What is your position on the county's Occupancy Tax (room tax) and its use for tourism, economic development and services? Should it be expanded or adjusted? *Short term rentals in the county would be banned wholesale. We are now seeing the downstream effects of allowing unregulated motels. "STR's" destroy communities, deplete the housing stock and make what little remains unaffordable for the average resident. An incremental step could be an STR license administered by the county. There are now hundreds of examples across the country and even the globe of municipalities taking such actions.*

12. What policies would you support to attract and retain local business, expand job opportunities and grow the tax base without overburdening existing residents?

I wrote a 4,000 word essay on this topic three years ago should anyone be interested in reading it. I am unable to condense my thoughts effectively to 250 words. The problem as I see it is that many people are catering only to tourists instead of focusing on the local populace. There are a myriad of industries that could benefit from being here. I have spoken to individuals in the past that wanted to open manufacturing operations but the property costs were preventative. Given that we have an even more artificially inflated market due to stock being eaten up by those who seek only profit through short term rentals.

Infrastructure, Safety & Environment

13. How should the county prioritize infrastructure needs (roads, bridges, debris removal, emergency preparedness)? *The number of outside contractors needs to be limited.*

The amount of waste and abuse I and others observed after Helene was and remains infuriating. People from out of state coming here, cutting down trees unnecessarily because they were being paid by the tree. Making the shoulder and the roads even worse, all whilst blocking traffic in blind curves causing legitimate traffic hazards.

14. Avery County stands as the lone county within the state without a dedicated and separate animal control services department. What is your stance regarding the issue of humane animal control services for Avery County and investing in those services? Should the county raise the means, allocate the budget and partner with regional entities to safely collect, care for and rehome strays, especially those wandering in high-traffic areas, as well as enforce universal animal welfare standards to protect local animals from neglect, abuse and rampant breeding? If so, how should this be accomplished? *Frankly I do not trust a government animal control agency. I can foresee animals being caught up in bureaucratic policies and unjustly taken from their homes. We have a culture of allowing dogs to live the lives they deserve. We have enough problems with tourists stealing pets. The last thing I would introduce is an agency with the legal authority to kill said pet because he or she was making rounds through the neighborhood. The logical answer is a public private partnership. Empower people that really care like Scooter's Animal Rescue with funding and facilities.*

15. What are your priorities for public safety — including EMS, fire services, law enforcement support and disaster response? *Consistent, substantive, high value training is the key to effectiveness when called upon.*

16. What environmental or natural-resource policies are important to you — including wildfire management, land use and conservation? *My grandfather worked for the forestry service, I grew up with my grandparents living in the house at the forestry service entrance. At this juncture I will not pretend to know more than the people that work in the field everyday. I would defer to their judgment and work with them on the most reasonable and logical solutions.*

Community Engagement & Governance

17. How will you ensure and promote transparency and responsiveness to citizens'

concerns? I would be completely transparent on any decision I am involved with. As I believe is the duty of any public servant.

18. How do you view your role in regional collaboration — for example with neighboring counties, state representatives and regional authorities? I believe Avery is often the canary in the coal mine, given the popularity of the county we should spearhead any collaboration we find ourselves in.

19. What key performance measures should the Board of Commissioners use to assess county progress on its goals — and how will you make those public? Goal dependant.

Values & Decision Making

20. How do you prioritize constituent interests when they conflict (e.g., economic development vs. environmental protection)? Defaulting on the side of what the Lord created will be my stance. We have to view things through an On-Balance lens. I will openly admit I believe we are dangerously close to being over developed. There are people in the county that want Banner Elk to be a "high end Gatlinburg". That is my greatest nightmare. To sell out this land and native people for a few dollars is unforgivable in my opinion. I want everyone to make a good living and there are existing ways to do that. I would venture that if we were to commission a study – the average second home in places like Linville Ridge and Grandfather support far more local families on an individualized basis than any tourist trap. There are also plenty of residents and workers to support local restaurants. I fear my short form answers will be interpreted as anti-tourist. I am not completely opposed to tourism but we must grasp that resources are finite. The constant encouragement of more and more tourists is unsustainable for a multitude of reasons. In this forum I cannot properly explain my position but I look forward to doing so at other junctures.

21. What's the most difficult decision you anticipate on the Board, and how would you

tackle it? This will be best answered once we know the makeup of the board. I imagine it to be properly articulating my positions to other members as well as the public. I have no ego in this, I am just trying to preserve the area that has made me who I am and the place I so dearly love. Should the apocalypse kick off tomorrow, I am not going anywhere. I will fight with all my ability to save this place and right now that fight is political.

22. If elected, how will you stay connected with everyday residents — not just stakeholders or special interest groups — throughout your term? By living my life as I have. The most important “stakeholders” are local, full-time, native residents. I can not be bought and I fear only God. I interact with people throughout the county daily. As a parent of young children, soccer coach, and business owner.