

**1. Why are you running for Avery County Commissioner? What experience has prepared you for this role?**

I am running because Avery County is at a crossroads, and as a native, I am concerned about our future now more than ever. Following Hurricane Helene, we need good leaders and problem-solvers who can rebuild from the ground up and approach our needs with a fresh perspective to help reshape existing infrastructure. My years of experience as a small business owner have taught me the value of a dollar, the importance of good planning, and how to navigate bureaucratic red tape.

My recent work as a volunteer helping citizens rebuild access to their homes after the storm has been the ultimate preparation for this role. I haven't just talked about infrastructure; I've been in the creeks and rivers, coordinating resources and restoring access for families who were cut off. I still work extensively with local, state, and federal agencies to help our citizens. Being boots on the ground has shown me exactly where our systems are resilient and where they need reinforcement. I have learned how to identify and secure the financial resources that become available after a disaster. I will apply the same grit and fiscal discipline in working as your commissioner.

**2. What are your top three priorities for Avery County in the next 4 to 6 years?**

My priorities focus on moving Avery County from a state of recovery to a state of long-term resilience:

1. Focusing on our county departments and the emergency management team, assisting them in any way I can to ensure they have the resources they need for our citizens in the event of another disaster.
2. Helping small businesses, agriculture, and tourism grow so our young people can find quality jobs here at home, and increase services so that we can keep more dollars local.
3. Prioritizing "needs" over "wants" in the budget and keeping property taxes stable for our citizens, as well as ensuring that we have the right people and measures in place to secure available funding that will help our citizens in the most critical times of need.

**3. What is your long-term vision for Avery County's growth, and how will you balance development with preservation of local character?**

Our local character is our greatest economic asset. We are a tourist destination for our breathtaking landscape and the character of our local people. By protecting our local heritage and natural views, we aren't just preserving the past -we are securing our economic future. As Commissioner, I will ensure new projects are measured by one question: "Does this make Avery County better for the people who actually live here?"

**4. If elected, how would you move forward on broadband expansion and public Wi-Fi access?**

We live in a time where reliable internet service is now a vital utility. As a business owner and grandparent to school-aged children, I understand that "near-total" coverage isn't enough; if you are in a dead zone, you are left behind.

We need to ensure that Avery County remains a leader in the Completing Access to Broadband (CAB) and BEAD programs to reach "last-mile" residents.

I support expanding high-capacity public Wi-Fi at community buildings, town halls, and fire departments. These serve as vital "digital harbors" during emergencies and as workspaces for our students, volunteers, and remote workers.

**5. What strategies do you support to improve access to health, senior, childcare and social services following Helene?**

There is a silver lining in every storm, and receiving the \$5 million FEMA grant for a new senior center is just that. We must expedite the Senior Center rebuild and consider supporting mobile service models—such as breast cancer screening, mental health, and pharmacy units—that rotate through remote areas, and are very effective in other rural communities. I also support maximizing state grants, such as WNC Thrive,

to keep local childcare centers affordable and open. As a former employee of our social services department, I understand that this vital resource must operate efficiently to ensure access for all who need it.

**6. How should the county address affordable housing and human service needs?**

As new construction of second homes continues to flood our area, the need for affordable housing for our local population is greater than ever. With many more people here now, we have an even greater need for human services to support our growth. I believe this is a critical need for our county and one that I am very focused on. This is not a new issue, and it won't be solved by our current commissioners, or even those running now, but we definitely need a roadmap for success - and a current and future commission who will see it through. If our local people have to go elsewhere for basic human services and can't afford to live here, we lose on every front.

**7. How should the county improve child and youth-oriented public services and spaces?**

I support public-private partnerships, such as the recent Carolina Hurricanes Foundation grant, to ensure our athletic fields and parks are not just restored but improved with better drainage and accessible equipment.

As the Board of Education considers middle school consolidation, the county must ensure extracurricular and mental health supports are expanded. I support strengthening our partnership with the Williams YMCA for affordable after-school care.

**8. How should the county help make this area more hospitable to youth and workforce ages?**

To retain our youth and workforce, we have to stop treating Avery County as just a retirement or vacation destination and start treating it as a place for the next generation to flourish.

We need to deepen our partnership with Mayland Community College and our high school's Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs.

As a local business owner, I know that young entrepreneurs are deterred by the lack of support for small businesses in my community. I will advocate for "startup-friendly" zoning and fee structures. We should also leverage the "Build Back Avery" spirit by supporting the Avery County Young Professionals group, giving them a seat at the table in county planning to ensure our policies reflect the needs of working-age residents.

**9. Regarding schooling, how should the county bridge student performance gaps?**

I believe we should start by hiring and, just as importantly, **retaining** our best teachers. Our public schools have lost much of their footing to homeschooling and private schools. We absolutely need to do our research and elect a school board that is knowledgeable and fiercely committed to making us proud of our school system once again, and **support them**.

**10. How would you approach the county budget to balance essential services with property tax impacts?**

I live by two simple rules: you cannot spend what you do not have, and it pays to save for a rainy day. I will focus on zero-based budgeting, justifying every expense from the ground up. My priority is to exhaust non-tax revenue from state and federal disaster grants to fix our infrastructure, keeping the local tax burden off the backs of our families and seniors.

My priority will be ensuring our grant-writing and administrative teams are the best in the state. If we can use federal dollars to fix a bridge or state grants to modernize a water system, that is a local tax dollar we can keep in our citizens' pockets. Many of our kind-hearted local volunteers have been wildly successful in helping storm survivors recover simply by asking the right people and organizations for help, and by effectively leveraging volunteers and donors to fill the gap for our survivors. Tough times call for creative measures, and I believe in proactively pursuing funding where it is available and managing it fairly and efficiently. Raising taxes should always be a last resort.

### **11. What is your position on the county's occupancy tax and its use?**

I was happy to see our county as a whole adopt the current 6% occupancy tax. This is a great tool to ensure that the thousands of visitors who enjoy Avery County help pay for the impact they have on our community, and to shift the financial burden away from our local property owners and onto those who use our roads, parks, and emergency services for short-term stays.

I do not, however, support expanding the 6% rate at this time. Our local tourism economy is still in a delicate recovery phase, and we must remain competitive with neighboring counties. Instead of raising the tax, we should focus on transparency and accountability within the Tourism Development Authority (TDA). I would like to see a clear annual report that shows exactly how these dollars support Avery County's resilience while satisfying the mandated use of those funds.

In short, the occupancy tax should work for the people of Avery County first. It shouldn't just buy billboards; it should help build a county that is worth visiting and a great place to live.

### **12. What strategies will you support to encourage sustainable economic development and support our local business community?**

According to the current website, our Economic Development Board consists of 7 business owners/executives, our county manager, and one commissioner. As someone who has been closely involved in 5 small-business upstarts in Avery County over the past decade, I know our resources are especially limited for helping small businesses here get off the ground. We need resources allocated to economic development and to support our local business community. If elected, I will look closely at where we are falling short and how we can become a county that not only attracts new small businesses but also actively supports our upstarts and existing businesses. I would like the opportunity to work with our county departments to help them understand the big picture, so they can support small businesses and work together to make our county a place where working-class citizens can survive. Without small businesses, we cannot support a growing community, and we can't keep our local families living, working, and raising families here.

### **13. How should the county prioritize infrastructure needs?**

Infrastructure is the backbone of public safety and growth. My work helping neighbors rebuild bridges after Helene taught me that we cannot simply "patch" our way to safety; we must build for the next fifty years, not the last five.

Our absolute first priority in infrastructure must be ensuring that every residence and business has emergency vehicle access.

When we replace culverts and bridges, we must meet or exceed the old standards. I have been a hands-on advocate for "resilient engineering"—using larger spans and improved bank stabilization to ensure that a 1,000-year flood doesn't cut our communities off again. I will continue working toward long-term solutions that protect our survivors and their families, as well as emergency responders, and any other human life crossing a waterway.

Infrastructure also includes roads and utilities that can support growth loads. I look forward to learning more about how we are positioned as a county for this growth, starting with a better understanding of why some of our towns are already experiencing growth-related strain, such as issues with water systems.

**14. What is your stance regarding the issue of humane animal control services?**

As a pet owner and a supporter of the responsible local hunting community members, this topic is very important to me. I have seen extremes on both sides, and I am hopeful that we can all work together to ultimately find the right solution for the animals. Education and open communication for both sides are needed.

I support a Public-Private Partnership: funding a dedicated Animal Services Officer within the Sheriff's Office who is experienced and, if possible, establishing a formal, funded service agreement with the Avery Humane Society for sheltering. It is my understanding that we may already have some dedicated funding for a new structure, so I am interested in learning more about the wheels that are already in motion.

Once a measure is in place, I will support holding violators accountable, as well as those who file false neglect cases for self-serving motives, TikTok likes, or simply because they drove by someone's house and saw a dog tied up outside. Obviously, both pet-care violators and those who make false claims waste our valuable tax dollars and further fuel the divide between pet owners and pet-rights advocates. Unfortunately, this has become somewhat of an us-against-them issue, and that is never productive.

**15. What are the priorities for public safety, including EMS, fire, and law enforcement?**

My public safety strategy focuses on retention, resilient infrastructure, and regional coordination.

We are facing a statewide crisis in recruiting volunteer firefighters and paramedics. In Avery County, we cannot afford to lose our local expertise. I prioritize providing competitive stipends and health benefits for our volunteers and ensuring our paid EMS staff have the equipment and modern facilities they need. We must treat our fire departments and EMS stations as critical infrastructure.

I support the Sheriff's Office in its mission to provide exceptional service to the citizens of Avery County. My priority is to ensure our deputies earn competitive wages that keep them in Avery County rather than lose them to neighboring counties.

We must turn Helene's lessons into a permanent Emergency Management playbook. This includes a pre-staged "backup" communications network (satellite and radio) that doesn't fail when the towers go down. I also support establishing neighborhood-level "Resilience Hubs" at local fire departments where water, power, and medical supplies are pre-positioned.

We need to learn from other counties, such as Buncombe, which has a greater depth and breadth of resources than we do. Their Board of Commissioners recently partnered with the city of Raleigh in reciprocal disaster emergency dispatch. I am an advocate for this type of collaboration.

**16. What environmental or natural resource policies are important to you?**

If elected, I look forward to learning more about our Soil & Water Conservation District, as well as the Toe River Health District (which serves both Avery and Mitchell Counties), and the array of services they provide to our county. I would like to ensure that all citizens are informed and aware that everything from building a house to plowing a field, to running an excavator in our rivers and streams has an impact much greater than we may realize.

Helping our citizens stay informed about available programs, such as the NC Farmland Preservation Program, the Avery County Farmland Preservation Program, and the 2025 Emergency Watershed Protection Program, is a great way to encourage them to take an active role in preserving our county's natural resources.

**17. How will you ensure and promote transparency and responsiveness?**

I believe that our current commission does a good job of promoting transparency and responsiveness, although I would like to take a more proactive approach in some areas. With everyone's hectic schedules, I probably won't get much support, but I would advocate for more opportunities for citizens to connect with our commissioners collectively outside the monthly commissioner meetings. This would involve sharing community needs and concerns, being more proactive where we can, and helping ensure we aren't each working in silos. I would propose quarterly Commissioner Town Halls, held in different townships—not just Newland.

**18. How do you view your role in regional collaboration?**

Hurricane Helene did not stop at county lines. Early on, I recognized the need for regional collaboration, which motivated me to initiate a resource for our citizens called Bridges For Avery. I had no idea when I started how truly important it would be to have a county-specific presence with regulators and resources for our survivors. This experience has helped me

navigate the various county, state, and federal agencies. I have been a loud voice and a constant presence with the inaugural team of bridge collaborators from across the state (consisting of FEMA, state departments, and national and international non-profit organizations) on behalf of Avery County since Hurricane Helene. I also successfully advocated with Ashe County to request support for Watauga and Avery Counties through the state's NOFO bridge reimbursement program, which was available only to non-profits supporting bridge construction. Regional collaboration is critical, particularly for our county commissioners. I believe that the Council of Commissioners does a good job with this.

**19. What key performance measures should the Board use to assess progress?**

We should track and report Infrastructure Resilience and Economic Velocity (the number of days to obtain a permit for small businesses). We must work through the roadblocks imposed by various county departments on our citizens and small businesses. We need a good way to measure what we want to manage and to make those results public.

**20. How do you prioritize constituent interests when they conflict?**

Economic development and environmental protection are two sides of the same coin in Avery County. I prioritize "smart growth" that protects our ridgelines and trout streams—our "Avery Brand"—while allowing businesses and essential services to thrive here.

**21. What's the most difficult decision you anticipate, and how would you tackle it?**

The 2026 Property Tax Revaluation is the most difficult upcoming decision. I will fight for a Revenue-Neutral Tax Rate to protect families from a tax shock during recovery. I will ensure a fair and transparent appeal process for property owners whose land was devalued by storm damage.

**22. If elected, how will you stay connected with everyday residents?**

Regardless of the election outcome, I will continue to be boots on the ground, advocating for our residents. If elected, I will visit our town halls and be readily available to our leaders, as they are on the front line with their citizens. I will hold office hours at local cafes and public buildings across the county because digital isn't everything. I will ensure meeting agendas are posted in local post offices and general stores so that every neighbor- native or non-native, with or without internet access - remains connected to their local government.