

2026 Avery County Candidates Forum Questions

1. Why are you running for Avery County Board of Commissioners and what experiences prepare you for this role?

My motivation to run for a 4th term as commissioner is the same as it has always been and that is to serve all of the citizens of Avery County. My roots run back generations and my love for this county gives me the energy to work every day to make this a great place to work and live. I have developed relationships with state and federal officials and agencies that places us in a very positive standing when it comes to funding and recognition of issues that affect our citizens. My business background and practical work experience allows me to navigate the complex structure of local government budgeting and operations. I have worked diligently in our Helene recovery efforts to bring the most resources to our county and have fought with FEMA and NCEM to maximize our reimbursements for the vast amount of damage that occurred. One of the primary things that I have learned was given to me in my first Essentials of Local Government class through the UNC School of Government. That guiding principle was that no commissioner has any authority except that which is delegated to them by statute from the NC General Assembly. Local governance is not doing what you want to do, it is finding out what we are statutorily allowed to do and working for the citizens within that framework.

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

Housing has been and continues to be a high priority for Avery County. This includes traditional types of affordable units as well as work force or market value homes that help build our communities. I have worked with grant opportunities, regional collaborations, developers, and other governmental partners to create new opportunities. Our local schools are another huge concern in the coming years. The district has been losing students at an alarming rate for the last 6-8 years and the loss of NCDPI and Federal funding has placed an increasing burden on the county support for our schools. We already fund schools at a rate that is significantly higher than most surrounding counties and that level is not sustainable. Economic development is also a high priority as residents need jobs and local businesses need customers. Our farms and Christmas tree growers are facing increased pressure due to cost of materials and the need for new markets and customers. Like most rural areas, we struggle to bring in large impact manufacturing or distribution due to our lack of roadways, railways, and runways which are key elements in business relocation. Resorts and tourism are a huge part of our economy but also produce pressure on roads, facilities, and public safety.

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

My goal is to honor our heritage while creating new opportunities for growth. There is a tension that exists between the long term natives and some of the recent developments that has to be acknowledged. I believe that we can move forward as a county when we understand that there are many aspects to our community and there is value in all of them. Local government is a factor in planning for the future, but I do not want to control private transactions or overly control what a private individual can do with private property. Statues and ordinances must be equally applied to all citizens, so it is not possible to control one area without impacting everyone. I have proposed several changes in our subdivision ordinance to limit density and place limits on the Planned Unit Development (PUD) provision in the ordinance. Growth is going to occur and local government can help to manage that growth to better serve all citizens.

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?

Broadband has been a focus for the entire time that I have served on the board. When we received American Rescue Plan funds after Covid, I advocated for using all those funds to leverage additional money through the NC Department of Information and Technology grant programs to expand services. As a result, over \$10 million has been committed to broadband expansion through the GREAT grant and CAB grant program and those changes are already taking place. We are also in line to receive additional funding through the BEAD grant program to reach even more residents in underserved areas of the county. These contracts have resulted in other companies working to expand their services as competitive options become available. I have worked across many different platforms and agencies, and those efforts have produced measurable growth with much more to come within the next 3 years. Local government does not control the private utilities, but we can be aware of opportunities to assist in funding for needed expansion projects.

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 those support systems following Helene?

The damage from Helene directly affected much of the community services capacity of the county, as the DSS building and the Senior Center were severely damaged. The DSS building expansion had only been completed about 6 months prior to the

storm as the need for those services had been addressed. Workers provided services every day by remote means until the building was repaired and in person could resume. The Senior Center was beyond repair, but one of our resort communities provided a location for Meals On Wheels food to be prepared and delivered. We recognized the need for senior services and a restaurant was purchased with county funds to assure programs could continue until the new Senior Center could be built. Property was purchased with county funds with a plan to build a new Senior Center as part of a new county complex. A CDBG-DR grant was applied for and we received \$5 million for the project to pair with FEMA funds and insurance payments. This will be a great addition to current services and will protect some of our most vulnerable citizens. The Avery County Health Department worked throughout the recovery and continues to provide quality services to all residents. Childcare is an ongoing issue across the state and I have advocated at the General Assembly level for assistance to support daycares by subsidizing worker's salaries and looking at regulatory reform.

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?

Housing of all types is an ongoing concern and much has been done. I worked for a re-entry facility for recently incarcerated individuals to reduce recidivism and assist with an organization that is serving this population. We reworked a grant submission to allow for expansion of our local domestic violence program and will now have a place to safeguard vulnerable families. There is a new affordable housing development in Newland that will expand those housing options. I continue to seek new opportunities for workforce and market value housing with emphasis on tax credits, grant programs, land trusts, governmental appropriations for infrastructure expansion, and regional collaboration to provide more housing options for local residents.

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?

Most folks would look at this question in terms of recreational facilities and these have been expanded recently with the new pool complex and the community center for meetings and activities. There are also sports programs through Parks and Recreation and the YMCA. The construction of a new county recreation facility has been discussed and a study and design contract was funded just before Helene. The

cost and placement of that facility is still under discussion. It is important to note that other services outside of recreation are critical as well. I have always supported funding our schools facilities and resource officers, public library, health department, social services, mental health programs, and substance abuse education and prevention.

8. How should the county help make this area more hospitable to youth and workforce ages so that it can retain residents who strengthen the local economy and infrastructure?

The factors that determine what is hospitable are as varied as the people that live here. We are all aware of the need for additional housing units and more employment opportunities, but that is not limited to any age demographic. Avery County will never have the employment, cultural, or recreational opportunities of a more populated area. What we do have, however, is an abundance of natural resources, a deep sense of heritage and culture and an absence of many of the issues that are present in an urban area. We have to leverage and improve the factors that make this a wonderful place to live and work and not try to make Avery County the very kind of place that folks are coming here to escape.

9. Regarding schooling, how should the county bridge student performance gaps among various areas of the county, helping at risk populations thrive through equity measures (i.e. help that is tailored to the unique needs of each group)?

Commissioners do not have any control over the operations of the school system and rightfully so as we are not educators or subject matter experts. The operation of the schools and the educational outcomes are directed by the duly elected Board of Education and the school district. My responsibility is to provide the facilities for learning to take place and provide local funding for operations.

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

The budget process is a very complicated exercise where many factors are considered. Property taxes produce about 50% of the budget revenue, so we are always looking at other revenue sources to meet the mandate for essential services and projected improvements. Avery County has a high property tax valuation that allows the tax rate to be in the lowest 10% of the state. The tax rate has not changed in 4 years as the board is very aware of the burden on local residents and every effort is made to keep property taxes as low as possible. Inflation is a factor with county finances just like they are in any sector and those costs must be paid in some

manner. Many grants and other governmental funding are tied to a particular project and cannot be used for general purposes such as salaries, equipment, or utilities. The county is required by law to present a balanced budget on July 1 of each year. We cannot operate in a deficit so there must be funding sources to meet all of the obligations. Public funds cannot be used to benefit private individuals or companies so most incentives that folks believe to be available are not legal by statute.

11. What is your position on the county Occupancy Tax and its use for tourism, economic development, and services? Should it be expanded or adjusted?

Occupancy Tax is something that I pushed hard to get based in the unincorporated areas of Avery County for many years. The towns of Banner Elk, Sugar Mountain and Beech Mountain have collected occupancy tax for many years but the rest of the county did not have the authority to collect occupancy tax funds. This required a bill in the General Assembly and the uses of these funds are very restricted and spelled out in the legislation. We cannot expand or adjust the funds outside of the specified purposes of tourism and economic development. I am very grateful to have occupancy tax and believe that it can have positive impacts, but it can never be used for general government purposes or to replace a deficit.

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 currently serve on the Economic Development Committee and am in regular contact with potential business interests. The Avery and Banner Elk Chambers of Commerce work every day to support existing business owners within the county. As far as growing the tax base with new business openings, there are a large number of folks who do not want to see a large expansion of tourism related business which is a major part of our economy. I have to balance those concerns about uncontrolled growth with possible economic development. I can certainly advocate for business expansion and new job creation, but the county cannot use public funds to subsidize any private business. I support expansion of infrastructure in partnership with our towns and continued improvement of our technology grid.

13. How should the county prioritize infrastructure needs (roads, bridges, debris removal, emergency preparedness?)

The county does not maintain or determine road projects as that is the job of the NCDOT. We meet regularly to advocate for improvements but that determination is

made at the state level. The debris removal task following Helene was overwhelming and I have worked with county staff, state and Federal agencies, FEMA and private contractors to remove about 1 million cubic yards of debris at a cost of over \$50 million. There was an after action analysis performed a few months ago that detailed some positive efforts but also detailed some areas that need improvement. Several steps have been taken to perform better in future events and county facilities have been upgraded and improved.

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 enforce universal animal welfare standards to protect local animals from neglect abuse, and rampant breeding? If so, how should this be accomplished?**

Animal control has a long and tumultuous history in Avery County with many strong opinions on the topic. I have supported increasing our animal control capacity through funding a deputy position with animal control responsibilities, purchasing and equipping an emergency animal trailer that can be used in many different situations, partnering with Mitchell County Animal Rescue to house seized animals, and assisting in receiving a \$2 million state appropriation for a dual county animal shelter. The new shelter project was slowed by Helene and the first draft of a plan for the building far exceeded the grant funds. We have worked to come up with a more affordable design and I continue to think this is a great plan for both counties. If this is not possible, I will advocate for a stand alone facility for Avery County with the support necessary for staff and supplies. I welcome the partnership with Avery Humane Society and have had several discussions about sharing facilities. I view county animal control as the agency tasked with dealing with criminal acts of abuse and neglect, providing support for population control through spay and neuter opportunities, dealing with disease and abandonment, and preventing over population through humane euthanasia when necessary. There are several wonderful rescue groups in the county and I believe that these groups will always serve a vital purpose in animal welfare. These services if provided by the county will easily add \$400,000 - \$500,000 to the budget which must be funded through some means. It is also worth noting that we must consider the individual rights of every citizen, not to abuse or neglect any animal, but to have the right to care for their animals in a manner that is not always agreeable to everyone.

15. What are your priorities for public safety – including EMS, fire services, law enforcement support and disaster response?

Public safety is one of the core responsibilities of county government in that it affects every citizen. The last budget had 33% of the total expenditures committed to public safety. Our Fire Commission exists so that the fire tax funds that are part of the total tax rate will be distributed across the county. I was a supporter of setting aside an additional \$500,000 each year to be used for capital improvements to our fire stations. Fire trucks and equipment are very expensive and a plan is in place to replace units on a regular basis. EMS units and equipment are replaced on a determined schedule to assure units are available and functioning. I fully support our Sheriff and work closely with him to maintain vehicles, facilities, and any needed equipment. The pay scale for officers and EMS workers has been revised to assure that we will keep our best staff in the county. Volunteer firemen are the lifeblood of our fire protection system and a new per call stipend has been put in place to reward responders for assisting in the calls across the county. There are determined efforts to analyze current disaster response and to be in a process of continual improvement through cooperation between agencies and making changes where necessary. Building resilience and mitigating risk is a key focus as we move forward, but those plans also come with a financial cost that must be planned for in the coming years. I have met with state and Federal officials and other agencies seeking grants and appropriations that will reduce the burden on local taxpayers.

16. What environmental or natural resource policies are important to you – including wildfire management, land use and conservation?

The fire risk following Helene has been the focus of many discussions across the state. The fuel load that exists on the ground right now is a tremendous concern and the lack of access roads only makes the situation more dangerous. Approximately 50% of the acreage of Avery County is termed as closely held, as defined by being part of National and State Forest lands, held by conservancies, or set aside in present use value for agricultural and forestry plans. It is difficult to remove downed trees when there are other partners that may not share the same sense of urgency or agree on the methodology of mitigation. The county does have strong ordinances concerning land use, high impact businesses, and soil and water considerations.

17. How do you ensure and promote transparency and responsiveness to citizen's concerns?

I have always been deliberate in my efforts to share information, answer questions, and listen to resident's concerns. I take the public comment time of commissioners'

meetings very seriously and will respond to emails and phone calls as soon as possible. I have been creating short, informative videos on Facebook that hopefully share information and answer questions. It is important to note, however, that just because a citizen does not know something, it does not mean that that information is being hidden or withheld. All commissioners' meetings are open to the public and I welcome the opportunity to clarify any issues that a citizen may have on a decision that I have made.

18. How do you view your role in regional collaboration – for example with neighboring counties, state representatives, and regional authorities?

Regional collaboration is one of the keys to our local success. I am the Chair of the High Country Council of Governments which covers 7 counties in WNC. This agency has helped us in many ways through grant writing and administration, regional planning, Area Agency on Aging, and Workforce Development. I serve as the Chief Local Elected Official on the Workforce Consortium which oversees the local workforce efforts across the region. We have been helped in many ways by Dogwood Trust, AMY Wellness and other regional funding agencies. I have worked closely with Dudley Greene and Ralph Hise as our voices in Raleigh to advocate for Avery County. The relationship with our Federal elected officials was never more important than when navigating the recovery from Helene. I have worked closely with the American Flood Partnership in a WNC regional partnership to help carry our message to Raleigh and Washington, DC. Avery County cannot operate on an island. We must continue to foster relationships with other partners to increase awareness of our issues.

19. What key performance measures should the Board of Commissioners use to assess county progress on it's goals – and how will you make those public?

The greatest measure of performance is in the results. There are few metrics that will provide as much context as what people see around them. The vast cleanup following Helene was a testimony of the efforts of local government to expedite that process. I was a supporter of purchasing a restaurant for our Senior Center in the short term and acquiring land for a future construction project that demonstrates our commitment to this population. Most, if not all, of any strategic plan will be measured by the results that are produced. My commitment to keeping county finances in check will be evidenced by the budget produced each year. My goal of increasing public safety will be apparent when that ambulance or fire truck shows up at your house with trained responders and all needed equipment or that trained deputy is on hand to protect the lives of citizens. My commitment to fight broken lives caused by

addiction and abuse is evident when folks see the Freedom Life Re-Entry house or seek shelter at the OASIS domestic violence home. The recent \$20 million high school renovation and the new cafeteria are evidence of commitment to our school facilities. My goal is to be the hardest working, most informed, best connected, most responsive and fiercest advocate for Avery County and that is hard to measure but folks will know it when they see it.

20. How will you prioritize constituent interests when they conflict (e.g. economic development vs. environmental protection)?

One of the most important revelations that anyone serving as a commissioner must learn is that you represent all of the residents of Avery County and there will inevitably be different viewpoints about issues or decisions that have to be made. I have always tried to look at all of the input from the citizens and make the best decision to benefit the entire community. It is rarely possible to please everyone with the hard choices that must be made. I strive to find a balance between different opinions and try to find a solution that incorporates a both/and approach instead of either/or mindset. This is not always possible but I try to consider all views when making any decision. The path forward is sometimes set for us as the statutory authority given by the state will not allow the board to make some decisions. The only assurance I can give is that I will research every position as much as possible and make the final decision based on the information that I have at that time.

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

The most difficult decision will likely be the one that I had not anticipated or even considered. Hurricane Helene showed us that new situations may arise that require decisions outside of anything we had experienced before. I think that the area of greatest concern right now is how we balance the varied areas in our county. There is a tension that exists across cultural and socio-economic lines that will only increase as demographics change in the coming years. The board sits in the balance of maintaining the county as it currently stands and seeking new opportunities for housing, jobs, and economic growth. Change is difficult for everyone and pressure on local government to navigate revenue streams and provide services will always be challenging. My goal is to make an informed decision that would create opportunities to grow and prosper while respecting the heritage that I love so much.

22. If elected, how will you stay connected with everyday residents – not just stakeholders or special interest groups – throughout your term?

I would continue to do the things I have done for the last 8 years. I have had policy discussions in the bread aisle at the grocery store or on my front porch because people know me and what I stand for on the board. I do not especially care for social media but maintain an active presence to learn about issues and to provide relevant information or to answer questions. The response to my county update videos on Facebook has been overwhelming positive and numerous residents have told me that they appreciate the clarity and context that I provide. I believe that I can go to any community in Avery County and answer questions the same way every time because there is no distinction in my message based on the audience. In an environment where trust in elected officials is in short supply, I believe integrity and authenticity will provide trust when everything else has passed away.