

## 2026 Avery County Candidates Forum

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

Avery county is my home, and I want to see it remain a place where families can live, work, and build a future. My wife and I have three daughters in Avery County schools, and like many parents, I want our children to be able to find good jobs here, stay in the area, and raise families of their own. The decisions made by the Board today will shape whether that's possible. I've spent many years serving the people of Avery County. As a firefighter, there's no room for politics or partisanship, you show up, solve problems, and take care of people. That's how I believe the county government should work.

I bring two perspectives to this role. First, as a small business owner in the construction industry, I understand what it takes to meet payroll, manage costs, comply with regulations, and make tough decisions in an uncertain economy. I know how government decisions affect local businesses, jobs, and the ability of working families to get ahead.

Second, I serve as a captain with the City of Boone Fire Department. In public safety, politics don't matter. You show up, you solve problems, and you take responsibility. That experience has taught me the

importance of accountability, teamwork, and making sound decisions with taxpayer resources.

Between running a business and serving in public safety, I've balanced budgets, managed people, and worked closely with emergency services, law enforcement, county staff, and volunteers. I'm running to bring steady leadership, common sense, fiscal discipline with transparency, and a commitment to putting Avery County families first.

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

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My top three priorities for Avery County over the next four to six years are fiscal responsibility, strong public safety and education, and economic growth.

First, fiscal responsibility must come first. Taxpayers deserve a county government that lives within its means, spends money carefully, and is transparent about results. The county's tax revenue and spending

have grown significantly over the past few years because of rising property values...but our population growth has remained largely flat. The county should focus on efficient management, accountability, and making sure existing dollars are being used wisely. Second, we must fully support public safety and education, but support must come with transparency. EMS, fire departments, law enforcement, and emergency management need the staffing, training, and equipment to do their jobs effectively. The same is true for our schools. I have three daughters in Avery County schools. Recent staffing disruptions, leadership turnover, and public concern over budgeting decisions have created uncertainty for teachers, parents, and students. That's not healthy for student outcomes or public trust. County leadership has a responsibility to ensure education funding is stable, decisions are clearly explained, and students, not bureaucracy, remain the top priority. Safe communities and strong, well-managed schools are the foundation of a strong county.

Third, Avery County needs smart economic growth. We should support local businesses, expand job opportunities, and invest in infrastructure in a way that strengthens the economy without sacrificing our character and quality of life. Growth should be planned and responsible, focused on long-term

stability, not short-term gains.

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

My long-term vision for Avery County is steady, well-planned growth, not growth for growth's sake. We should grow in ways that support local families, small businesses, and working people while protecting our mountains, small towns, and strong sense of community.

Balancing development and preservation starts with infrastructure. Hurricane Helene caused significant damage to our roads, bridges, water and sewer systems, and power infrastructure. While that was devastating, it also gives us an opportunity to rebuild smarter and stronger systems that serve current residents and can support future growth.

Workforce housing is another major challenge. Too many people, who would like to stay in Avery County, can't afford to live here, making it harder for businesses, schools, and healthcare/emergency services to find the workforce they need. Expanding and improving infrastructure is a key part of addressing that problem.

Growth should be planned, transparent, and guided

by data, directing development to appropriate areas and keeping negotiations open and accountable. We should shape growth instead of reacting to it. Done right, growth creates opportunity and stability while preserving the character and natural beauty that make Avery County home

**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 is essential for students, businesses, and families in Avery County. Expanding it countywide is complex and costly, so the best approach is to partner with private providers through incentives and public-private partnerships rather than running it as a county service. Providers like Starlink can often deliver faster, more reliable service at lower cost.

I also support public Wi-Fi in community spaces, especially parks or areas with poor cellular coverage, to help close gaps while long-term infrastructure is built. Any investment should include clear benchmarks, cost controls, and regular public updates so residents can see how funds are being used. Reliable, affordable broadband supports education, economic growth, and quality of life across the 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 believe the best solutions come from listening to the professionals working every day in health care, senior services, child care, and social services, and understanding the real challenges they face. Their experience and feedback must guide our decisions.

Access to health care and community services remains a major challenge in Avery County. Our residents must travel outside the county for hospital, urgent care, and essential services. We need to work closely with existing providers and regional partners to expand consistent care closer to home.

Supporting seniors is also a priority. The new senior center is an important step, but we must plan for sustainable, long-term funding so it remains a lasting community resource. Child care, disability, and social service programs depend on strong partnerships, and I support continued collaboration with nonprofits, faith-based groups, and community organizations to maintain continuity of services.

**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 affordability is a growing challenge in

Avery County. Tourism and second homes bring important revenue, but they also price out local workers and vulnerable residents. I support pursuing state and federal grants and public-private partnerships to expand affordable and workforce housing, while ensuring county planning, inspections, and health department processes are efficient and timely.

Addressing homes for the unhoused, domestic violence support, and substandard housing, requires strong coordination. I want to hear directly from the professionals working in these fields about what is working and where gaps exist. The county should work closely with nonprofits and regional partners to ensure continuity of services, reduce duplication, and maximize the impact of available funding so residents can live safely and with dignity.

**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?**

Child and youth-oriented public services should be a top priority for Avery County. Our children are the future of this county, and if we fail to invest in them, everything else eventually falls apart. Sports, parks, and youth programs are essential to a child's development from early childhood through the

teenage years. They provide structure, a sense of belonging, and positive community engagement, while creating opportunities and connections that last into adulthood. These programs also build pride and a strong connection to where we live. Avery County has some great parks and facilities, but many have been neglected or lack long-term planning and maintenance. Youth services should not be treated as temporary luxuries. We need consistent and ongoing investment of time, effort, and funding into our parks, playing fields, and programs. There is also opportunity for better coordination of recreational and youth efforts so resources aren't duplicated or wasted. Our children shouldn't have to leave the county to do a sport or find a facility.

**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?**

The county should take an active role in making Avery County more hospitable to youth and working-age residents by creating a community where people want to stay and invest their lives. That starts with strong schools, well supported teachers, and educational opportunities that prepare students for careers and skilled trades.

Parks, recreation, and youth programs are also critical. Families are more likely to stay in a community that offers safe, well maintained parks,

quality recreation programs, and activities for children and teens. These spaces build connection, improve quality of life, and give young people positive reasons to stay engaged in their hometown.

As our population continues to age, retaining young residents is essential to maintaining a strong local economy and public services. By investing in education, parks, and recreation, the county can help make Avery County a place where young people don't feel they have to leave to succeed but instead choose to stay, raise families, and strengthen the 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)?**

Bridging student performance gaps in Avery County starts with equity that recognizes different needs, not a one-size-fits-all approach. That means using needs-based funding so lower-performing schools receive additional resources such as reading specialists, small-group tutoring, and targeted interventions.

The county should work closely with the school system to ensure teachers and staff are supported, properly trained, and equipped to succeed. When educators are stretched too thin, students,

especially those most at risk, are the first to feel the impact. Any effort to improve outcomes should include input

from teachers in every school, listening to the ideas and perspectives of the people working with students every day.

Early intervention matters. Strengthening Pre-K through early elementary instruction and supporting school leadership helps set students up for long-term success. When educators are supported and their voices are heard, every student has a fair opportunity to reach their full potential.

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

The county has a responsibility to balance essential services with respect for taxpayers. Property taxes should be stable and predictable, not the first solution when challenges arise.

Over the past four years, property values and taxes have increased, and the county budget has grown by more than 30% over a \$10 million increase while population growth has remained relatively flat. Yet many services and infrastructure needs have not kept pace. That tells me the issue isn't simply revenue, it's how effectively we manage and prioritize what we already have.

My approach is to focus first on efficient management, accountability, and clear outcomes. Core services such as public safety, education support, and basic infrastructure should always be the priority.

Before asking residents to pay more, the county should aggressively pursue grants, leverage state and federal funding,

and responsibly use occupancy tax and tourism-related revenues for allowable purposes. Tourism is an important part of our economy, and those revenues should help offset costs where possible.

Raising taxes should be a last resort, not a default. With smart budgeting, transparency, and a focus on alternative funding sources, we can meet community needs while protecting residents from unnecessary tax increases.

**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?**

Tourism is an important part of Avery County's economy, but our residents matter just as much. The occupancy tax should support tourism in ways that also benefit the people who live here year-round.

I believe occupancy tax revenues should be used responsibly and transparently, with a clear connection to outcomes that strengthen the county as a whole. That includes supporting tourism related economic development while also easing the strain tourism places on infrastructure, emergency services, and local resources.

Any changes to the occupancy tax should be data-driven, publicly discussed, and carefully evaluated to ensure they are working as intended. Before making further adjustments, we should review how recent changes are performing and whether they are delivering real benefits for both visitors and residents.

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

To attract and retain local businesses while protecting existing residents, the county should focus on smart, targeted policies. I support efficient, predictable permitting and zoning processes that move projects forward responsibly, with clear standards and accountability.

Workforce development partnerships with schools, community colleges, and local employers are also critical to connecting residents with good-paying jobs. Incentives should prioritize local hiring, small businesses, and industries that fit Avery County's

character and long-term needs.

13. Emergency preparedness, debris removal, and resilient roads and bridges should be ongoing priorities, not reactive responses after damage has already occurred. Focusing on readiness and long-term planning helps protect residents and reduces costly repairs in the future.

County resources should be used strategically to maintain preparedness, address immediate needs, and position Avery County to leverage state and federal funding. Local dollars should help match grants, speed up recovery, and ensure projects are planned and executed efficiently.

Rebuilding after recent disasters gives us an opportunity not just to repair what was damaged, but to improve and strengthen our infrastructure for the future.

State and federal aid should play a major role in large-scale recovery and disaster-related projects, while the county focuses on preparedness and coordination. By being proactive rather than reactive, we can protect residents, control costs, and build infrastructure that serves Avery County well into the future.

**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?**

Avery County needs humane, professional animal control services. As county commissioner, I would support establishing a dedicated committee made up of our current animal cruelty investigator, representatives from volunteer organizations already doing this work, fundraisers and grant writers, the Humane Society, and county leadership.

This committee would develop a multi-year, step-by-step plan with a clearly defined budget and measurable goals to build the foundation for a county animal services program. The plan would focus on responsibly managing stray animals while providing clear avenues for enforcement of animal cruelty laws.

Fully establishing animal control services will take time, but by creating a structured plan with stages of growth, we can build public trust, secure sustainable funding, and ensure Avery County develops an animal services program that is effective, humane, and supported by the community.

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

Public safety is foundational to a strong community. EMS, fire services, law enforcement, and emergency management help ensure Avery County remains a safe, welcoming place to live and visit. These services are essential to both resident quality of life and the county's tourism-driven economy.

Public safety already represents a significant portion of the county budget, so investments should be guided by data-driven decision making with public welfare as the top priority.

While the resident population has remained relatively stable, Avery County's transient population continues to grow, increasing call volume and demand for emergency services. If we do not continue to strengthen and improve these resources, they will fall behind. We must work closely with emergency management to identify needs, plan proactively, and ensure resources are allocated where they are most effective.

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

Avery County's natural beauty and outdoor recreation are among our greatest assets, and protecting them must remain a priority. Our forests,

farmland, and open spaces are not only part of our way of life, they are vital to both our farming economy and our tourism industry. We should support science-based forest management practices, improve coordination with state and federal partners, and invest in prevention efforts rather than relying solely on emergency response.

Preserving our natural resources isn't about stopping growth it's about managing it wisely so future generations can enjoy the same landscapes and opportunities we have today, while sustaining the industries that depend on them.

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

Trust in our local government has been damaged in recent years, and many residents feel frustrated and unheard. Questionable decisions, poor contracts, unprincipled hiring practices, and mismanagement of public funds have created real skepticism which has to be acknowledged, not dismissed.

Transparency and responsiveness must be intentional. That begins with improving how information is shared, making sure it is accurate, timely, and easy for the public to understand. County decisions, budgets, and contracts should be clearly communicated before and after votes are taken, not buried or explained after the fact.

I would support more frequent opportunities for citizen input through public forums, community meetings, and open dialogue before major decisions are made. Listening to residents, responding to concerns, and acting with integrity are not optional; they are the responsibility of local government.

Rebuilding trust will require consistent transparency, accountability, and a commitment to putting the best interests of Avery County residents first.

**18. How do you view your role in regional collaboration — for example with neighboring counties, state representatives and regional authorities?** 18. The challenges facing our county aren't unique; they're shared across our region. Effective regional collaboration is essential to making the best use of limited resources, securing funding, and planning for sustainable growth.

I see this role as working closely with neighboring counties, state representatives, and regional authorities to share resources, coordinate services, and pursue joint funding opportunities. Whether it's infrastructure, emergency preparedness, animal control, or youth services, collaboration allows us to be more efficient and avoid duplicating efforts.

By working together regionally, we can stretch taxpayer dollars further, and ensure our county is part of a broader strategy that benefits not just us, but the entire region.

**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?**

The Board of Commissioners should track clear, measurable performance indicators to evaluate whether the county is making real progress toward its goals. These should include metrics related to financial health, service delivery timelines, infrastructure progress, broadband expansion, and public safety readiness. Establishing benchmarks for new projects from the start allows residents to see what success looks like and whether the county is meeting its commitments.

Transparency is just as important as the metrics themselves. These measures should be made easily accessible to the public through multiple channels, including regular updates at public meetings, summaries published in the local paper, and consistent communication through an updated, user-friendly county website and social media platforms.

Making this information easily accessible to the public allows residents to see what's working, what isn't, and where adjustments are needed. It also creates opportunities for community feedback, helping ensure county decisions remain responsive, accountable, and aligned with the needs of our citizens.

This regular monthly update should be clear, simple

and the same each month/ Published after each commissioners meeting so it reflects real actions not promises.

**20. How do you prioritize constituent interests when they conflict (e.g., economic development vs. environmental protection)?** When competing interests arise, my decisions are guided by honesty, safety, fairness, fiscal responsibility, and long-term impact. I prioritize listening to residents, experts, and those most affected, then weigh the facts to find practical solutions that protect our county while supporting responsible growth. My focus is on sustainable outcomes that serve the broader community and future generations.

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

The most difficult decisions on the Board will involve the county budget, because you can't meet every need at once or please everyone. These choices often come down to setting priorities and making tough trade-offs.

I would approach those decisions by focusing on core services, using data to guide funding choices, and keeping the county's long-term health in mind. Just as importantly, I believe in being honest and transparent with residents about why decisions are made and what the trade-offs are. When everyone is working toward the same goals and understands the

process, even difficult decisions can move the county forward.

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

If elected I believe the best way to stay connected is to meet people where they are. I will do that by being present at school events, community gatherings, and outdoor recreation activities, taking the time to listen and have real conversations with residents.

Social media is also a valuable tool, not as a replacement for face-to-face communication, but as a way to hear concerns and understand what issues matter most. When someone reaches out on line it's an opportunity to go speak to them in person to hear their concerns. Staying connected means being accessible, visible, and willing to show up throughout the entire term.