

Candidate for Avery County Commissioner: Jason Grindstaff

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

As a lifelong resident and small business owner of more than 20 years, with 11 years of service in fire and rescue, I have gained a deep understanding of the needs of this county. With this perspective, I believe I can contribute thoughtful, effective, and fresh ideas to the table.

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

My top priorities are to strengthen emergency services, infrastructure, and economic development.

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

I would like to see Avery County grow and flourish as a place where my children and future generations can remain and earn a good living. While development is both inevitable and necessary, it is essential that we preserve the county's heritage and small-town character—qualities that attract both developers and residents from other regions and define who we are as a community.

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?

Avery County is currently in the process of gaining widespread internet access. It is important to continue this expansion and ensure its full completion.

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 support moving forward with building a new senior center to ensure the elders of our county are well served. Disability and child services are well established within DSS. Collaborating closely with the directors to address these concerns and effectively meet the needs of the community is crucial.

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?

Again, these issues are recognized by DSS. Working closely with them to identify needs and implement effective resolutions using grant funding and partnerships with other agencies such as Habitat for Humanity and Appalachian Service Project.

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.

The county can improve child- and youth-oriented public services by initiating and finalizing a new recreation center, which was sidelined due to Helene. We need to encourage parents to keep kids involved and give them a place to be involved. In the current state of our recreation department, we can't compete in sports with surrounding counties. A revision of the recreation department is needed.

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?

We need to work in conjunction with the school system to enrich our CTE programs, which in turn would encourage kids to seek trade jobs, keeping them in the county.

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)?

Again, promoting the CTE programs, working with local contractors to form internship programs, as well as continuing the current partnership with Mayland Community College, allowing kids to take college courses throughout high school and potentially graduate with an associate's degree. This will help kids who may not be able to afford college learn valuable skills and make a comfortable living wage.

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

Seeking grants to supplement where it's needed to keep services available with as low an impact on taxpayers as possible.

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?

State statute states that the money levied from occupancy tax must be used only for tourism.

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

As stated before, I would support apprenticeship and internship programs. I believe that the expansion of broadband will also help bring in businesses, which will increase both job opportunities and employee retention.

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

Safety and access should be the top priority when it comes to infrastructure. The county has absorbed a significant portion of the financial burden following Hurricane Helene in order to respond swiftly and effectively. As recovery continues, it is important to prioritize securing state and federal aid

to restore county resources and to explore additional avenues of assistance for rebuilding private bridges.

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?

I agree that Avery County has an animal population problem. I was made aware that there is an advisory board in place for a partnership with Mitchell County to build a joint animal shelter. I would like to pursue meeting with that board to see if we can get the ball rolling for this much-needed program.

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

I really want to focus on and strengthen public safety. I would like to propose incentives that would encourage folks not only to volunteer but to remain with our fire departments. I also believe our first responders need to be equipped with personal medical bags so that they have essential items to respond to emergencies in the case they can't get to their local department.

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

Since Helene, our wildfire risks are higher than ever. I would like to build on the already formed "Fire Wise" program and work with the county ranger to mitigate these risks. I feel like our county still has a good bit of land in conservation, forestry, and farm use. However, we cannot tell people what they can do with their land, whether that be selling out to a developer or preserving it.

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

I will ensure and promote transparency by instilling trust, listening to the citizens, and taking their concerns into consideration. I would encourage citizens to attend commissioner meetings in person or to stream them on YouTube. Also, all meeting minutes are posted on the county website.

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

You must network and be willing to reach out to and work with other levels of government, especially when an issue arises that you're not solely familiar with.

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?

Continue holding monthly commissioner meetings, budgeting and allocating funds for proposed projects, and seeing those projects to completion. The county website is a great resource to keep up with what is going on in the county.

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

I would explain that for the county to be successful, growth is essential. We need jobs and economic stability, and development brings this to the county, especially for tradesmen and women. My driving force is the future of our county for our youth.

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

The most difficult decision I believe I will face as commissioner is tax increases. I will seek ways to lighten the burden for citizens without taking from essential services.

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

I'm a people person. My hope is that when I'm out in the community, I am approachable and make people feel comfortable enough to engage with me.