

Chamber of Commerce Questionnaire Response

Elizabeth Johnston, Candidate for McLean County County Board, District 5

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Do you consider yourself a catalyst for positive change? What are your top three priorities if you are elected to the McLean County Board?

I see myself as a collaborator, and I view the whole as being greater than the sum of its parts. All members of the County Board bring their own strengths, and collaboration is about using those strengths to create the best McLean County possible. If elected, my top priorities are to create long-term economic, environmental and social stability; increase the transparency of the Board; and increase citizen access to the Board as a whole.

I see long-term stability in terms of both economic and environmental sustainability. These can work hand-in-hand if we focus on local economic investment and provide opportunities for innovative graduates from our local universities to develop their ideas into new business ventures and enterprises.” Local businesses are amazing partners because the community is their home, and these entrepreneurs know their economic viability and quality of life are integrated into the health and vitality of the region.

One of the aspects of County government that many of us can agree on is that the public wants and deserves greater transparency and accountability. To accomplish this, I want to see the County website redesigned for ease of navigation, so that, for example, residents interested in how their tax dollars are used are able to easily access this information.

Finally, I would like to see all Committee meetings live-streamed (as meetings of the full Board now are) and moved to a time that a larger proportion of the general public would reasonably be able to attend. Committee meeting live-streaming would promote transparency, as many substantive discussions – and important preliminary decisions – occur during Committee meetings, not only in meetings of the full Board. More often than not, votes are not taken by roll call, and it can be difficult to determine by voice recognition how any individual member is representing his or her constituents. Changing the times of Committee meetings would also create greater access for participation in both County decisions and Board membership. The current meeting times prevent people who don't have highly flexible work schedules from even considering a position on the Board.

In your opinion, what is the largest strength of McLean County? What is the greatest challenge the County faces? How will you face each of these?

Our county's largest strength is its economic diversity . McLean County's diversity ranges from the agricultural industries that provide some of our greatest revenue streams; to our universities which bring in young adults from across the state, around the country and from overseas; to large, mid-size and small businesses which have made their headquarters here and provide stable employment; to the countless non-profit organizations that work tirelessly to provide services in Central Illinois.

Together these entities fuel vibrancy in our communities where people live and raise their families.

Our greatest challenge today is the need for even greater diversification in order to better employ and protect the residents of McLean County. We must continue to ramp up our efforts to retain the talent and experience of our existing workforce in the face of recent shifts in the market, even as we develop greater opportunities for underemployed families.

I would like to see stronger partnerships built among the Chamber of Commerce, the Economic Development Council (including BN Advantage), Illinois Wesleyan's Small Business Development Center, local municipalities, and McLean County government to foster that growth. As a community, we will not succeed by "working in silos" but rather as a *team* that agrees and acts collaboratively upon its strategic economic development priorities, steering clear of avoid unnecessary stumbling blocks.

I want to see McLean County thrive and diversify. I want to see us become stronger as we gain a new footing in relation to the unusually uncertain future we face today. I will tackle these challenges by pushing for strong intergovernmental cooperation among the Chamber, the Economic Development Council, the IWU Small Business Development Center, the Farm Bureau, and others. That means balancing employer and employee needs; coping with changes in state, national, and international economies; and doing all we can to support entrepreneurial talent from within and attract new industries from the outside to stabilize workforce opportunities and enhance our long-term prospects for financial sustainability.

The most engaged companies, those that become true community partners, are those that make full use of local knowledge, skill, and ability, once again, including our own Creative Class – energized, local graduates who find McLean County is their permanent home of choice and a community they love.

If elected to the County Board, how would you work with the municipalities to enhance and ensure regional collaboration?

In McLean County, we have a tradition of strong intergovernmental cooperation, and I will help sustain that legacy. Historically, there have been semi-regular meetings involving the City, the Town, and the County to accomplish just such a goal. I would like to bring back quarterly meetings to help elevate existing levels of intergovernmental collaboration. Bloomington and Normal are best served when embracing a symbiotic relationship, just as the County is best served when the Twin Cities partner with all the communities in McLean County. One goal is to build an understanding across the County that all of our communities – and all County Board Districts – are interconnected. When we support each other, we each do better. The County is in a unique position to foster regional planning, and I strongly encourage cooperation among all of our municipalities for development.

How do you plan on making yourself available to not only your immediate constituents but to community groups and leaders, organizations, non-profits, etc.?

I am available to all residents of McLean County by phone, email, Facebook, and Twitter, and I am also very open to meeting with concerned individuals in person. Since announcing my candidacy, I have spent a great deal of time meeting with county constituents from a variety of Board Districts, with county officials and employees, and leaders of organizations that play essential roles in the community.

Do you consider McLean County to be business friendly? Why or why not? What changes would you advocate for if elected?

McLean County works with large corporations to make this region attractive for expansion and relocation through tax incentives and a variety of kinds of flexibility. If elected, I want to see all employers given the same growth-oriented inducements. I would push for more incentives for local companies, and I would like to see a business incubator established to help new businesses get off the ground without crippling start-up costs. We have a strong community and a stable population base, which create the best environment for businesses to thrive. Fear is the enemy of commerce, but if we continue investing in development, then the general community – and the business community – will remain strong.

In your opinion, what role does economic development play in diversifying the local economy? Should the County government play a role in this?

Economic development teams play an essential role in diversifying the local economy, thereby meeting the employment and service needs of McLean County communities.

Variety in local industries promotes greater stability and protects every sector across the region. The community relies on the Economic Development Council, the Chamber of Commerce, the Small Business Development Center, and the Regional Planning Commission to identify opportunities and gaps in the marketplace, as well as facilitate advantageous growth. While our people are ultimately what define this community, the economy is the heart pumping life to all of our citizens and families.

County government has multiple roles to play in helping to navigate the business landscape. The County, together with all other units of local government, contributes materially to delivering high-quality local government services such as public safety, education, and recreation – essential ingredients in creating a county-wide community attractive to potential employers and employees alike. County government also is charged with maintaining the overall health and welfare of the county, through the 28 County Departments and Offices that work for the citizens of McLean County. None of these Departments is in the business of creating a profit or competing with a local business, but they all must be good stewards of the County's funds – another quality that businesses look for in any local community. The County Board can play a vital role by helping to maintain a stable community in all of these respects. And when the basic needs of the community are met, citizens and businesses can grow and thrive.

Are you familiar with the BN Advantage? How would you engage with the Economic Development and Marketing Strategy to help competitively move this region forward? www.bnadvantage.com

The BN Advantage program is exactly the type of cooperative partnership that will make the most of the county McLean is. To maximize BN Advantage's emerging strengths, I would encourage greater regional and national exposure. The program's website provides pertinent information, and a valuable Top 10 list that most communities wish to achieve. We are one of Illinois' best kept secrets and the efforts of BN Advantage could be exponentially maximized as social media spots targeted in specific markets. Locally, I would want to see ads related to the benefits of patronizing brick-and-mortar stores within the County and how to get involved in promoting McLean County both internally and externally. Other ad copy would be best directed outward to attract entirely new businesses and welcome new families to our communities. Finally, to get residents more involved, it would be helpful to have regular gatherings open to the public with upcoming dates posted on the site.

How do you plan to overcome difficulties presented to the County by the unstable financial situation in the State of Illinois?

The current crisis in the State of Illinois certainly cannot be ignored, but the best defense we have is to work together as a cohesive unit to mitigate some of the harmful practices that might threaten our community's well-being. County Treasurer Rebecca McNeil has worked diligently with others in County government to ensure that cash flow remains stable in the case of another State budget impasse. Also, County Administrator Bill Wasson has the support of the County Board in leveraging available funds to make the most of funding from additional sources. By doing this we simultaneously sustain needed community services and save on dollars invested in the long run. While exercising fiscal responsibility may not always be the most popular way forward, it is clearly the only prudent and sustainable course of action for County government.

Are there any government services you feel are missing from the County? Alternatively, are there any that you view as non-essential and could be eliminated to cut costs?

Since announcing my candidacy for the County Board, I have been meeting with McLean County Department heads and community leaders to understand County government from all perspectives. McLean County offers a multitude of services not otherwise provided by the local market, either because of state mandates whereby those services must be operated by government entities or because the market finds some services unprofitable. Many departments have adapted over the years to become more efficient in their provision of services, finding that new investments of time and money is saving on long-term costs.

While the County is not in the business of self-promotion, it may be worthwhile to produce occasional marketing spots for our Departments so the community is aware of the value County Departments bring to McLean County and the contributions they make to our economy. I have learned that the great majority of County Departments are filled with dedicated public servants, who work diligently to serve the people of the County. I expect to continue learning from each Department as well as from county constituents about what their wishes and concerns are for County services. In this regard, there are areas where I have had useful feedback from County residents, and would like to explore some possibilities for change:

1. I envision using the County's core position in intergovernmental agreements to open dialogue about the approximately 200 units of local government within the county to assess where there might be duplication and thus opportunity for streamlining services.
2. There will always be a need to consider the benefits of technological improvements in creating more efficient office staffs, which could help us offset immediate expense with long-term cost savings.
3. I would like to explore separating election oversight from the County Clerk's office and allowing an appointed, non-partisan office to manage all elections for the County.
4. I would also like to explore greater use of the County's Regional Planning Commission to create basic planning frameworks tailored to each community's needs. If, for example, multiple communities are spending resources to develop fully independent plans, some of which might be 80% similar, it would be a better use of resources to develop a general planning framework applicable to many different government settings, and then invest our resources in the 20% of the planning process that is unique to each individual municipality or other government entity.