



Candidate Questionnaire for DeKalb Chief Executive Officer (CEO)

Summary of Responses

April 17, 2024

Who We Are - DeKalb Citizens Advocacy Council (DCAC) is a group of community members from all parts of DeKalb County. Our goal is to educate the citizens of DeKalb County about county governance issues and to advocate for informed citizen engagement and government transparency. We are operating as a 501(c)(4) organization and do not endorse candidates.

Project / Purpose – DCAC conducted a voter education project for the election for the DeKalb Chief Executive Officer (CEO) position. We used the following questionnaire to gather information from all qualified candidates. Candidate responses are provided here verbatim and will be made available to the public online and to the media prior to election day.

Methodology – DCAC emailed the questionnaire to the email addresses the three candidate posted on their qualifying paperwork to the Secretary of State's office.

1. What are the Top Three issues that you want to address for change in DeKalb County once you become CEO?

Steve Bradshaw

1. Public Safety. Our numbers, especially in the police department, are very low. I will need to do something dramatic on the compensation and benefits front to turn this around.
2. Economic Deveopment, especially in South DeKalb. I will apply the leverage of my office and direct Decide DeKalb to focus on that area.
3. Mutual Cooperation. I will continue to work on building better relationships between DeKalb County and our municipal leaders.

Lorraine Cochran-Johnson

My three top priorities for my term in office will be public safety, economic development/infrastructure and affordable housing. Please see below my plans to address each major priority:

Public safety is one of the most pressing issues facing DeKalb County. Although crime in general is down, in 2020 DeKalb became the leader in violent crimes, i.e., assaults, battery, murder, homicides, rape, and aggravated assaults. Unfortunately, across the United States, we see an uptick in violent crimes. As your CEO I will create an atmosphere that is harsh on crime and swift on apprehension and punishment through Operation Safe Streets (OSS).

Through OSS, DeKalb will immediately fill all vacant police positions through addressing proper pay and incentives. Our officers will engage in expanded community patrols and undercover operations to combat crime. Through my work with local communities, I have been directly responsible for undercover operations that have cleared our streets of criminals who operate in plain sight.

I will create a rea-time crime technology center and expand our community policing to active in-house monitoring of high-crime areas. I will expand upon my Video Surveillance System (VSS) Legislation that requires cameras at all gas stations, service stations and high-risk businesses. I will promote the use of technology and cutting-edge programs that help our officers and community fight crime and produce safer communities while creating programs that address the underlying causes of crime that often go unaddressed - economic development and education.

Economic development is critical to healthy, thriving communities. Economic development encompasses business recruitment, economic well-being, and the quality of life of a community. It embodies the physical, economic, environmental, social and demographics of our communities and does not simply occur - it is planned. In certain parts of Central and South DeKalb, we have seen an exodus of small businesses in once thriving communities. As CEO, I will create an environment that facilitates business and actively engages economic development partners to do business in DeKalb through proper policies and processes. I will ensure efficient operations in Planning and Sustainability, ease of permitting, and continue important infrastructure enhancements to create a landscape of success.

As our official economic development engine, I will increase funding to Decide DeKalb Development Authority to

expand their efforts to recruit internationally and domestically. I will be strategic about creating character and a sense of place as I grow DeKalb. In South DeKalb along Candler Road and Central DeKalb along Memorial Drive, continued and strategic development efforts are needed. As CEO, I will engage partners in catalytic development initiatives that will jump-start revitalization and economic development using a variety of tools including tax abatements, Public Private Partnerships (P3s), Tax Allocation Districts (TADs), Opportunity Zones, HUD-CDBG funding opportunities, and Historically Underserved Business Zones (HUB Zones) and custom incentives.

Housing development is critical to the future of DeKalb. Across America the supply of housing is too low to meet demand, resulting in high prices that many economists describe as an affordability crisis. There is no state or county where a renter working full-time at a minimum wage job can afford a two-bedroom apartment, while 70% of all extremely low-income families are severely cost-burdened, paying more than half their income on rent. Unfortunately, DeKalb County is no different. In 2021, at the height of the pandemic, the DeKalb County Housing Authority maintained a waiting list of over 40,000 individuals seeking affordable housing. Today, over 30,000 individuals remain in need of affordable housing in DeKalb. Among the renting population, nearly 50% pay more than 30% of their income towards rent. According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, nationally there is a shortage of more than 7 million affordable homes for our nation's 10.8 million plus extremely low-income families.

As CEO, my administration will focus on increasing both rental and single-family housing inventory through strategic efforts under focused leadership. I will employ a Chief Housing Officer (CHO) who will work with developers to facilitate housing development. He will leverage low-income housing tax credits, tax abatements and all tools available to facilitate and encourage housing development. I will expand upon partnership with organizations like Operation HOPE to provide down-payment assistance to easily transition first-time homebuyers. In 2019 I partnered with Operation HOPE to open HOPE at Stonecrest through funding provided by RBC Bank for two full-time financial consultants. To date our partnership has resulted in over \$20 million dollars in down-payment assistance and first-time home loans to support 91 new homeowners in DeKalb County.

Larry Johnson

Violent Crime

Infrastructure

Recreation, Health and Greenspace

2. The perception of poor service delivery across multiple operational departments is top of mind among residents. How do you propose for the county to do better in this area?

Steve Bradshaw

That perception is real. Therefore, as CEO I will need to lead a culture change in DeKalb County to make improvements in this area. I have extensive private sector experience; therefore I am confident in my ability to lead this effort. Those who are willing and able to adapt will continue to have a future with DeKalb County. Those who cannot adapt will need to seek opportunities elsewhere.

Lorraine Cochran-Johnson

Across DeKalb poor service has been an ongoing issue raised by constituents. As you CEO, I will master service delivery through ensuring all staff members have a complete knowledge of their job, proper training, client relationship management software, and service level agreements. Currently, across various departments I have found a great deal of ambiguity that leads to a lack of accountability when there is a breakdown in the service delivery system. As the CEO, I will ensure each employee has written job roles and responsibilities and each department will be governed by standard operating procedures (SOPs).

To facilitate good customer service, I will utilize Client Relationship Management (CRM) software. As a DeKalb County Commissioner, I quickly learned that several departments were not cross functional. So, there was an inability to answer service related questions related to Code Compliance, Sanitation, and Planning and Sustainability. I will implement the use of CRM software in the 311 Call Center so operators and various departments can see service requests and check the status of service request. Such system will eliminate the current duplication of service requests for the same issue “ which frustrates callers and slows down the service process.

Technology has proven to be insufficient or perhaps less than desirable in certain departments. Planning & Sustainability has been a cause of concern by developers and business owners as they await the processing of business licenses, water and sewer capacity reports, and certificates of occupancy. I will critically analyze current systems and ensure best practices and adequate, user-friendly technology is present, to facilitate productivity.

Lastly, I will simply bring people out of the existing and ongoing Executive Order that has DeKalb County under a shelter-in-place order as business is being conducted daily across the globe. Employees will return to work and a hybrid system will be considered. Across DeKalb, and in the 311 Call Center I will institute a three-call ring maximum. When departments are contacted, I will require action. Frontline leadership will engage in monthly service meetings and data will be utilized to determine calls received and processed and I will use automated surveys to measure customer satisfaction.

Larry Johnson

I recognize that the perception of poor service delivery is a significant concern for our residents. My commitment is to enhance accountability and transparency across all departments. To do this, I propose implementing a comprehensive performance monitoring system that tracks the efficiency and effectiveness of services delivered by DeKalb County. This system will be accessible to the public, ensuring that our constituents can see real-time progress and hold us accountable. Furthermore, I plan to establish a resident feedback mechanism that directly informs department improvements and policy adjustments. I will also solicit input from executives of companies

and businesses known for quality customer service to help build a world-class customer service delivery program. This will include holding quarterly focus groups with residents and stakeholders to help measure our successes and address areas that can be improved by using best practices guided by research. By prioritizing these steps, we will not only improve service delivery but also rebuild trust between the county government and the communities we serve. It's about making sure every resident of DeKalb County feels heard, valued and served with the highest standards.

3. The Charter Review Commission heard anecdotal evidence from citizens about concerns and issues but had no real data about departments' service delivery goals and achievements to examine. Would you support a county-wide Operational Review conducted by an outside firm?

Steve Bradshaw

Yes

Lorraine Cochran-Johnson

Yes

Larry Johnson

Yes

4. DeKalb County used to have a more robust #311 platform for fielding and tracking questions and problems among DeKalb citizens; then the budget for #311 was cut significantly. Would you, as CEO, support making the #311 system more functional, transparent, and effective? If so, what would you propose doing? If not, how would you propose to better address tracking and handling citizen complaints?

Steve Bradshaw

As CEO I will support making the #311 system more functional, transparent and effective. I will start by restoring the budget funding that was cut. I will then assess the impact of that change and move forward from there.

Lorraine Cochran-Johnson

The DeKalb 311 Call Center is the director of first impressions as to what consumers can expect when interacting with DeKalb County. I will carry DeKalb from a governmental entity to a service based organization that is driven by customer satisfaction. Currently the 311 Center does not have the ability to see information and ticket numbers associated with Code Compliance, Planning and Sustainability, and Sanitation. I will bring information to their fingertips using Client Relationship Management (CRM) software. CRM software will allow 311 operators to access various departments and check the status of service request, while creating service tickets. CRM software will eliminate the current duplication of service requests for the same issue “ which frustrates callers and slows down the service process.

I will institute a three-call ring maximum for the 311 Call Center and employees will be taught customer service skills and receive ongoing professional training. When departments are contacted, I will require action. Frontline leadership will engage in monthly service meetings and data will be utilized to determine productivity, i.e., calls received and processed and automated surveys to measure customer satisfaction.

Larry Johnson

As CEO, I would strongly support revitalizing the #311 system to make it more functional, transparent, and effective. A robust #311 system is crucial for ensuring that residents' questions and problems are addressed promptly and efficiently. To achieve this, I propose restoring and increasing the budget dedicated to the #311 platform. This investment would enable the integration of advanced technology for better tracking and management of issues, as well as ensuring transparency in how complaints are handled and resolved. Furthermore, I plan to implement a feedback loop where residents can follow up on their complaints and see the outcomes of their inquiries. This approach addresses the immediate need for an effective communication channel between the county and its residents and reinforces our commitment to accountability and transparency in serving the DeKalb community.

5. Several county staff and leadership positions in multiple operational departments have been vacant for months or years. Staffing and operational effectiveness is a key responsibility of the CEO. How do you plan to tackle this problem?

Steve Bradshaw

I will direct the Chief Operating Officer and the HR Director to provide me with candidates to fill the open vacancies. I will start this process during my transition period which will be several months. My intent will be to make offers to viable candidates during the first quarter of my first year in office as CEO. That will we be a new administration will hopefully serve as a draw for some of the best and the brightest who would want to help me execute the necessary changes in how we operate.

Lorraine Cochran-Johnson

Currently across several DeKalb County departments, key leadership positions have been vacant for months and in some cases years. Understanding staffing and operational effectiveness is a function of the CEO, I have already begun an assessment of several departments to understand current staffing, job duties, roles, and responsibilities. A lack of leadership and presence in key positions within some DeKalb County departments has affected output and the overall success of several departments. As the CEO of DeKalb County, I have developed an organizational structure that eliminates some positions, redefines others and creates key positions that will be conducive to a more effective government.

The structure of an organization plays a central role in its success and effectiveness. A well-structured organization better guarantees clarity, accountability, and efficient workflow, while a poorly structured organization often finds it difficult to cope with communication, decision-making, and overall performance. I will redefine some positions and create others to ensure an efficient and effective DeKalb.

During my five years as a member of the governing authority of DeKalb County, I have seen the need for project management and more narrowly defined job duties and better organization in some instances. I will release my newly structured organizational model on my first day in office, and immediately set about building a team that meets the structure necessary to move DeKalb progressively forward.

Larry Johnson

Addressing the issue of prolonged vacancies in county staff and leadership positions is a top priority for my administration. Staffing and operational effectiveness are indeed critical responsibilities of the CEO, and to tackle this problem, I propose the following approach. We will conduct a comprehensive audit of all vacant positions to understand the barriers to hiring and retention, including competitive compensation, workplace environment and professional development opportunities. Based on this audit, we will develop and implement a strategic recruitment plan targeting professionals who are not only qualified but are also passionate about public service and committed to our community's well-being. By prioritizing efficient hiring processes and fostering a culture of excellence and accountability, we can fill these critical vacancies with the right people and enhance the operational effectiveness of our county's departments.

6. Another ongoing issue that is top of mind among residents is governmental transparency. Many reports that reach the CEO's desk are never released to the public. Will you promise to change this, and if so, how will you communicate with the public that transparency is a priority for you?

Steve Bradshaw

Transparency is the key to building trust with the community. I will hold regular town hall meetings throughout the county in line with what I have done as a County Commissioner. I will admit our mistakes and highlight our successes. I will be straight forward about my positions on issues, even if it makes me unpopular with some people in the short term. As CEO I will be accountable to the citizens on DeKalb County, and I will never lose sight of that.

Lorraine Cochran-Johnson

Governmental transparency has been an ongoing concern expressed by DeKalb residents throughout my time as a County Commissioner. Not only has a lack of transparency been an issue for residents, as a member of the governing authority, I have witnessed several instances where I learned of important decisions through press releases and news reports. I have not had a seat at the table. In 2020, I learned of a housing study that was conducted in 2018 that called for a variety of actions to ensure affordable housing from a news report. As the CEO of DeKalb County, I plan to increase transparency and access to information through enhanced technology and the active engagement of residents using a conglomerate approach. I will ensure DeKalb residents have immediate access to information, thereby reducing calls and open record requests for information.

Understanding the critical role technology plays in transparency, I will immediately begin the overhaul of the current DeKalb County website and key documents, reports, and audits will be placed at the fingertips of constituents. I will make available all audit reports. I will be accountable to the people with written actions and assessments that include dates and timelines to remediate and correct any known deficiencies as a result of audit recommendations.

As a marketing professional and former publisher, I will grow DC-TV into a functional network complete with programming and a news anchor who reports issues relevant to DeKalb. I will continue to use my Weekly Chat Podcast to produce relevant content that educates DeKalb residents and expands upon my Tele Town Halls that have brought together over 20,000 constituents to learn about important issues. Also, I will utilize SMS text to phone on a bi-weekly basis along with weekly newsletters to ensure all DeKalb residents are actively engaged in government.

Larry Johnson

Yes, I firmly commit to changing the current practice and ensuring that governmental transparency is not just a priority but a hallmark of my administration. To communicate this commitment to the public, I plan to implement a series of measures to increase the openness and accessibility of information. This includes establishing a digital portal where all non-sensitive reports and documents that reach the CEO's desk are promptly published and made easily accessible to the public. Additionally, I intend to hold regular neighborhood forums and town hall meetings to discuss issues, address concerns and gather feedback directly from our residents. Through these actions, coupled with a policy of proactive communication via social media and other platforms, I aim to build a culture of transparency that reassures our community of our dedication to accountability and open governance.

7. There is a technology platform called OpenGov that is a tool many counties and cities across the nation use for providing governmental accountability and transparency to their constituents. Would you support adopting OpenGov or a similar platform in DeKalb County for this purpose? WHY or WHY NOT?

Steve Bradshaw

Yes, I will. I believe in the notion of continuous process improvement. And I will aggressively pursue any initiatives that will help us on this front.

Lorraine Cochran-Johnson

I take no issue with the use of OpenGov as a tool to provide governmental accountability and transparency. It is a widely used tool and would serve DeKalb well. I firmly believe information should be readily available to the consumer. When information is withheld, doubt and concerns grow and flourish, so I look forward to providing a technology based platform that ensures maximum constituent engagement.

Larry Johnson

Yes, I would support adopting OpenGov or an open check book system or a similar technology platform in DeKalb County to enhance governmental accountability and transparency. These platforms offer powerful tools for visualizing budgets, expenditures and operational metrics in real-time, making it easier for residents to understand how their government operates and resources are allocated. Adopting such a platform aligns with my commitment to making our government more accessible and transparent to the public. It fosters a culture of openness, allowing residents to engage more actively with their government. Moreover, these platforms can improve internal efficiencies, enabling better decision-making and resource management. Implementing OpenGov or a similar system would be a significant step to ensure our constituents are well-informed and engaged in local governance.

8. DeKalb has just completed the first comprehensive review of its Organizational Act in over 40 years. The DeKalb Charter Review Commission has made a specific set of recommendations and has presented its report to the CEO and BOC. Which, if any, of the recommendations do you NOT support being changed in the Organizational Act and why?

Steve Bradshaw

If a goal is to improve CEO/BOC relations I think that granting the BOC subpoena power is exactly the wrong way to achieve that end. Candidly, I could see that authority being abused and weaponized to achieve misguided ends. The best way to avoid the need for that is for me as CEO to be intentional and inclusive regarding my relationships with members of the Board of Commissioners. After two successful terms as a county commissioner, I think I have a honed sense of what individuals might want or need from the CEO's office. But rather than relying on the prism of my own experience, I will just ask.

Also, there should remain a mechanism for breaking tie BOC votes. Otherwise, things could grind to a halt.

Lorraine Cochran-Johnson

After forty years we engaged in the Charter Review process after an agreement was made in 2017 between the DeKalb Delegation and CEO Thurmond to review the Organization Act. Recently, the review was completed, and the findings were presented for adoption and concerns were raised by some members of the governing authority. Since the recommendations were not presented during the 2024 Legislative Session, the matter of adoption of the Charter Review recommendations will fall upon the new CEO. I support the current recommendations by the Charter Review Commission as a great start, but there is much work still to be done.

Several parts of the current Organization Act remain in direct conflict with state law. In particular, the section that states the process for when an elected official qualifies for another office. According to the Org Act the individual has until April 1st to tender resignation, however the State of Georgia says an elected officials aborts their seat at the time of qualification. The current Org Act is silent as to the future of staff that works for an elected at the time of qualification. Consequently, due to ambiguity and politics, I have found my staff prohibited from performing critical duties, including the development of a weekly newsletter to keep District 7 constituents informed.

We must use the Charter Review process to remove ambiguity and partisan politics so there is a clear understanding as to the period between an elected official qualifying for a new position and the seat being filled. Also, the current law allows individuals whose terms end during the year they qualify for a different seat to continue service despite qualifying to run for a different position. Consequently, taxpayers fund candidates as they campaign during working hours and attend events and functions directly related to their run for another office. We saw such behavior when Kemp ran for Governor and continued to function as the Secretary of State. All actions have consequences and as the CEO, I will ensure a detailed Charter Review so we have written laws that govern all processes, so as to remove ambiguity and partisan politics, while instituting best practices. Understanding the importance of Charter review, I am prepared to accept the current recommendations, but I welcome the opportunity to work with either the current or a newly established Charter Review Committee to ensure we conduct a detailed review of the Org Act.

Larry Johnson

I appreciate the DeKalb Charter Review Commission’s hard work and recommendations for improving our Organizational Act. There are necessary steps we should take to improve the current system. I do not support the creation of a department for Open Records; however, as CEO, I will create a new position within our county’s Law Department to address open records requests specifically and I will create an easily accessible space on our county’s website where residents can file an open records request.

9. Staffing deficiencies in DeKalb’s Police and Fire Departments have been an ongoing problem for the county and has affected public safety operations and perceptions. You and the other candidates for CEO have been in the BOC during this time and have not been successful in rectifying public safety staffing vacancies. With you in the CEO seat, what would you do differently to fix this situation in your first year in office?

Steve Bradshaw

As I stated in my answer to question one, I will do something dramatic on the compensation and benefits front to turn this situation around. Additionally, leadership is critical component of employee retention. That would start with me. In both my words and my actions, I will make sure that the men and women who are charged with protecting us know that they have an advocate and friend in the CEO's office.

Lorraine Cochran-Johnson

In 2022 the administration announced the engagement of a consulting firm to conduct a regional pay study to determine pay grades for our police officers. The study looked at major markets across the region including Alabama, Virginia, Tennessee, etc. Following the study the CEO made a decision to raise the salary of police officers in DeKalb county to \$55,000. I learned of the final action through a press release announcing DeKalb has the highest paid officers in the region.

The use of a regional study was a poor tool of measurement for salary determination, because DeKalb recruits primarily from metro Atlanta. A look at local police jurisdictions will show Dunwoody, Brookhaven and Chamblee has the highest paid police officers. DeKalb's pay must be in-line with local salaries if we seek to be competitive in officer recruitment. Since the ability to set salaries falls under the jurisdiction of the CEO, once elected I will have the authority I need to raise police and fire salaries, but I cannot be short-sided.

Employees across DeKalb have not received consistent pay increases - with many not seeing a pay increase in twelve years. I will give not only public safety, but also departments across DeKalb competitive wages. Beyond wages, I will provide incentives, including housing down-payment assistance and ongoing professional development to make DeKalb attractive. Lastly, I will explore a program that vests our officers after ten years of service at 80% of their highest salaries.

Larry Johnson

In my first year as CEO, addressing the staffing deficiencies in DeKalb's Police and Fire Departments will be a top priority. The approach will be multifaceted, recognizing that a one-size-fits-all solution is not sufficient for a challenge of this magnitude. First, I will work closely with the departments to conduct a comprehensive review of the recruitment and retention strategies currently in place, identifying areas for immediate improvement. This includes competitive compensation and benefits, career development opportunities and work-life balance initiatives to make DeKalb a more attractive employer for public safety professionals.

Second, I plan to launch targeted recruitment campaigns that reach out to potential candidates locally and nationally, highlighting the benefits of working in our community and their critical role in public safety.

Third, I will advocate for partnerships with educational institutions to establish pathways for young people in our

community into careers in public safety, ensuring a steady pipeline of qualified candidates.

Finally, recognizing the importance of community support, I will seek to strengthen the relationship between our public safety departments and the communities they serve, as this mutual respect and understanding are foundational to a robust public safety strategy.

By taking these steps, I believe we can make significant strides in addressing the staffing shortages and improving public safety operations and perceptions in DeKalb County.