



WINONA AREA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE 2022 CANDIDATE QUESTIONS

County Board

Chris Meyer – District 1 Candidate

- 1. What should the Winona County EDA (Economic Development Authority) be doing to support and increase private sector business development/job creation?**

After serving on the EDA, I know that they would like to do more than just administer the revolving loan fund, and so voted to spend a small amount contracting for EDA services through CEDA, and to fund a county-wide housing study. I would love to go further and see the County EDA position that was eliminated prior to my election reinstated. Attracting workers is equally as important as growing jobs, as the worker shortage is projected to continue to hold us back economically. This makes improving housing and childcare access and affordability critical. Recent research shows that if affordable childcare was available 6000 women across the region would join the workforce, which would go a long way toward filling the 10,000 vacant positions.

- 2. How do you define the role of the County Board of Commissioners verses the role of paid County staff?**

Our policies give direction on this question and so I abide by those policies. I see our staff as important assets to the county so a more important question to me is how can I support them, to reduce turnover and improve morale.

- 3. What should the County Board be doing to support and promote agribusiness in Winona County?**

Strategically focusing on areas that work for all county residents is a priority for me. In practice, I would like to see the County fully fund the Soil and Water Conservation District, like our surrounding neighbors. I'd love to see 60% rather than 6% of our farmers using cover crops. In this way we can expand and address water quality issues at the same time. Additionally, there are models, such as value-added, grass-fed, or A2 protein dairies, where farmers can garner a price to fully compensate them. Education and supports for such models is lacking.

4. How should the County Board of Commissioners balance the rights of private property owners and current/future county regulations?

Strategically focusing on areas where we can compromise and move forward to address all property owner's rights is critical. It also seems important to not bring about unintended consequences and so to allow information to suggest paths of action rather than ideology.

5. What should be the role of Winona County Government in working with townships and municipalities for growing private sector jobs?

We are in a time when finding workers is as much of a priority as growing jobs because the worker shortage is holding back our economic growth. As previously noted, I would like the County to reinstate the EDA position that was eliminated or replace it with contracted services. The county should focus on collaborating with the townships and cities inside our borders on issues like affordable childcare and housing so that we can attract workers.

6. What do you see as the County's role in job creation and economic development?

Again, I would love to see Winona County re-instate the County EDA position that was eliminated prior to my election. This is much needed help for those smaller communities in the County. The worker shortage is holding us back economically. We should address not just job creation but also those issues like affordable housing, lack of childcare, recruiting more non-traditional candidates into the work force, and promoting our quality-of life. The County Board has funded a county-wide housing study with ARPA funds, and I have been participating in a group focused on childcare expansion, as well as networking with SMIF and groups that are interested in supporting childcare providers.

7. Where do you stand on possible future pandemic mitigations? How would you balance having a vibrant local economy while maintaining a safe community?

I am really proud of Winona County's pandemic response and I think it highlights both safety and economic support. The collaboration with organizations across the county allowed for high participation at our vaccine clinics, and easy access to personal protective equipment. Additionally, Winona County was a leader in using both CARES act and ARPA funding for direct grants to local businesses, with the majority of those grants going to small businesses. Recent public health information leads me to believe that COVID has now become endemic and I don't see the need for any future County implemented mitigation other than a future possible clinic for Bi-variant covid vaccines.

8. The recent jail project is a significant expenditure for the County, what steps do you believe need to be done to ensure this ongoing debt will not be a detriment for business and economic development in Winona County?

We are already working with our state delegation to have the State Legislature approve our ability to implement a quarter-cent sales tax to meet the about \$1.5 million annual debt service (our 2022 levy was about 20 million in total). This would shift some of the burden to visitors in our community and off of the property tax levy. If approved this will be put to the public in an upcoming referendum to be voted on. The bill was not passed by the last legislative session but we hope it will be in the next session. Until then, a little over 7% of our current levy will be going towards debt relief. Note that we raised the levy 4.17% in 2022 towards jail debt and have proposed to add 3.12% more in the 2023 levy.

- 9. Many communities across the state have seen many public safety officers leave or retire early from their positions. These same communities are having difficulty re-filling these positions due to negative public perceptions and lack of funding. What steps do you believe need to be taken to ensure that our community's law enforcement is adequately funded and supported so that our community remains safe and healthy?**

We face these same challenges but in addition to that the rural parts of the county are also facing a crisis recruiting volunteer first responders (fire fighters and EMTs). Our County Emergency Manager has pulled together a task force, for which I am a board liaison and we are exploring options related to ambulance service coverage. We are also funding a joint first-responder recruiting campaign with County ARPA funds.