Andy Black  
Republican Candidate for Hamilton County Commissioner

1. Infrastructure and development investments generate significant revenue for the County, for example the Banks and Smale Park are estimated to attract $1.7 billion in revenue to the county each year. How has the COVID pandemic affected the Hamilton County budget and how will budget changes impact infrastructure programs and future development plans?

There is no debating COVID-19 has greatly impacted Hamilton County in a multitude of ways, with our budget being negatively affected standing out as one of the long term side effects of the pandemic. It’s been estimated that sales tax revenue could be down in 2020 as much as 20%, which will have serious impacts to Hamilton County’s ability to move forward. Hamilton County leadership will be required to move quickly to account for this loss of revenue and ultimately rethink the priorities we have as a local government.

I think as we move to the future we will need to make sure we can address the mandated functions the county is required to provide, including public safety, infrastructure and attracting economic development opportunities. Then we need to identify the highest priority areas and develop plans to address those needs with an eye toward making some of the areas of need self-sustaining operations, either through corporate sponsorship, charges for services, grants and other funding sources.

2. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, average hourly wages in our region are 4% below the national average. Regional employment is concentrated in six occupational groups and falls significantly below national representation in eleven employment groups, including construction. What are your plans to encourage job growth in industries that can bring higher wages, diverse occupations, and help create new housing and development?

In order to attract higher paying jobs that are committed to remaining in Hamilton County, our local government must first prove itself to be competent and willing partners in assisting in the growth of economic opportunities. This means consistently delivering a balanced budget and presenting long-term plans to demonstrate to job growth industries they are not taking a major risk when investing in Hamilton County. Additionally, as taxes in Hamilton County steadily rise it’s much more difficult to attract new people to come into Hamilton County. For a number of years, we have watched as Hamilton County’s population has shrunk, which has then required a tax increase to maintain current operations. If we establish a track record of success (i.e. consistent economic growth and net-new job opportunities), we will then attract people to Hamilton County, thereby diminishing the need to continually raise taxes.

With respect to what I would refer to as a growth in “office jobs”, first we need to coordinate with our existing companies and make sure we are not developing road blocks to their success. Secondly to attract young entrepreneurs from diverse backgrounds (see: Austin, TX and Nashville, TN), I believe we need to continue to offer high-quality amenities and offer more arts & entertainment opportunities. Finally, I think we need to meet with our corporate partners and get an assessment of our region’s strengths and weaknesses. We need to realize we are not a large enough metropolitan area to be everything to everyone, and we need to focus on our strengths and market them.
3. Recently, a large private project in Hamilton County had to bring in masons from out of state due to a lack of available workers here. What are your plans to address the shortage of labor in skilled trades essential to future development and growth?

We need to work with industries and employers along with the necessary training and education institutions to create partnerships where there is a clear path from a high school degree through training to a good paying job. The county could provide some seed money to get these programs up and running and to publicize and expand those that exist.

4. According to the SBA, small businesses in Ohio employ 2.2 million people, or 46% of the state’s workforce, and produce a GDP of more than $656 billion. What are your plans to help small businesses in Hamilton County recover from COVID19, grow, and thrive?

First, we need to continue to open up our economy as quickly and as safety as possible. Getting people back to work, and working at full capacity, is key. Second, as businesses and families have had to tighten their belt to get by, Hamilton County needs to do the same. This includes looking at places we can trim our budget, specifically those with high operations and maintenance expenses. The county owns and maintains a number of properties, including Paul Brown Stadium, that we simply can’t afford to continue paying for on our own. I propose considering all-options and ultimately getting county government out of the stadium business. This would ease the tax burden on citizens and open up new funds to provide aid and focus on new development. Another avenue is for the county to continue to fund the Economic Development Office, and work to identify incentives that could be helpful for new or small businesses with high potential for growth and long-term success.

5. Hamilton County faces an affordable housing crisis with a shortage of 40,000 units. What is your position on zoning changes and development incentives to encourage more housing construction, especially multi-family housing?

I believe it is clear large housing complexes of affordable housing do not work long-term for the residents or the surrounding community. I support changes to zoning codes to offer incentives to include affordable housing in their developments. I am opposed to changes that require affordable units without corresponding incentives. Incentives could be in the form of a slight increase in density of units or in the form of tax incentives. I think only by incorporating affordable housing in developments will we make progress on the issue and create long term solutions.