

Mayor's Editorial

The Office of County Mayor is unique in Tennessee. Although a city mayor is restricted by the geographical boundaries of their municipality, a county mayor has certain duties in all municipalities and the unincorporated areas of the county. Some of the more recognizable duties of the county mayor include public health, emergency management, public works and school funding. The Shelby County Mayor is accountable to all citizens of our county.

The most significant challenge we have faced during the past year has been the decision to merge our two school districts. I felt this was a decision that should be made by all county voters since, undoubtedly, it would impact county taxes. After much legal deliberation, a decision was rendered allowing Memphians to make that decision exclusively. Fortunately, our state legislature established a transition process that was signed into law by the governor and approved by the federal court. That action established the Transition Planning Commission (TPC) to create a merger plan for review by the state education department with approval and implementation by the Shelby County School Board by fall 2013.

The 21-member TPC, comprised of education, government and business leaders, was selected and has been meeting weekly for the past few months. The TPC has already looked at "best practice" standards from some of the more effective public school systems in the nation. Despite the TPC's devotion to a data driven plan, citizens continue to be concerned about the future of local public education. Many critical questions continue to be discussed in living rooms and offices throughout our county:

- Will my child have to change schools?
- Will my child be bused out of our neighborhood?
- Will the curriculum, program and teachers stay in place?
- Will my child be safe at school?

Other questions are also being asked, particularly, whether municipalities should start their own school system. In many instances, smaller systems offer educational advantages unique to their respective communities. As stated many times in public meetings and news media interviews, I'm not opposed to the municipalities setting up their own school systems as the state law provides.

The citizens of the respective communities must look at the financial impact of that decision. If municipal schools are established, should existing buildings be donated to those municipalities? My position is simple. The buildings should be donated if it does not add an additional tax burden or increase the debt for Shelby County residents. There are significant issues that are yet to be resolved and will likely require court action before a resolution is complete. Most notably, how will the County's responsibility to fund the education system translate with a multi-district profile? Currently, we fund the two separate school systems, Shelby County Schools and Memphis City Schools, on a prorated basis according to student attendance. The laws are unclear as to whether the municipal school districts would be entitled to County-provided funding or if the respective governing bodies would be required to provide the majority of local funding for municipal schools. Similarly, capital needs—like school construction, major renovation, and maintenance projects—are funded on a prorated basis according to student population. Again, it is unclear how capital funding needs are to be addressed in a multi-district environment. The issue of transferring existing schools to a municipality is the subject of pending state

legislation and contradictory local legislation. Tax and debt implications will be unknown until more definitive information is received about the transition plan and the needs of future municipal districts.

It is vital that all of the options and facts about the merger plan be fully understood. There are still many complicated issues that remain unresolved, particularly attendance zones and funding sources. It's crucial the TPC, the newly created Shelby County School Board of education and the municipal leaders work together to sort out the answers.

We should never lose sight of the main objective—to properly educate our children for a 21st century workforce. I will support public schools, municipal schools, private schools and home schools that will achieve this goal. The challenge before us is to ensure that all of the suggested options meet this standard. This could be a costly process for taxpayers. Let's make sure our money is spent wisely and students are better prepared for graduation.