Understanding Talbot County Government

1. What is one function of Talbot County government that you believe is currently underperforming? What specifically would you change, and how would residents know whether your change worked?

At this moment, I currently feel all functions of Talbot County government are working well due to sound staff leadership and a County Council who supports that staff. For purposes of this question though, I will use an actual example of an arm of Talbot County that was underperforming – our Repurposing Center on St. Michaels Rd. It had very high capital needs as a fairly new commercial venture and was not capturing revenues at anticipated levels. After several years, the answer was inevitable; it had to close to commercial clientele so that taxpayers weren't subsidizing an unprofitable business venture. Now, it is an internal-only cost center to the County Roads Department which will allow cost-savings for current and future Roads Department operations. This happened 7/1/26. Residents will see the financial benefit from this action in FY '27 and in the upcoming FY '28 budget cycle presentations.

2. What county program, policy, budget item, or service have you personally examined while preparing to run? What did you learn that changed or complicated your original position?

I'll utilize my same scenario as in question 1 – the Talbot County Repurposing Center. I visited the site in 2021 prior to winning my seat on the 2022-2026 Council. I thought the venture was a novel one and even set up an account and bought product from them for many years for my small business. Once I had insight into the operation's financials over several years, the numbers told the inevitable story.

County Spending and Taxation

3. Identify one existing county expenditure that you would reduce, eliminate, or restructure. Approximately how much would your proposal save, and what would you do with those savings?

I have been vocal about the lack of need for the Police Accountability Board (PAB) and the Administrative Charging Committee (ACC). It is yet another example of "across-the-bridge" problems that are forced upon all Maryland Counties – putting problems where problems don't exist. We have a wonderful Sheriff and Deputies in Talbot County. The state legislation that created this board and committee in 2021 negates the authority of our elected Sheriff. This board and committee also did not come with state funding for its existence – yet another "unfunded mandate" from the state. If the PAB and ACC could be eliminated, it would restore full disciplinary authority to our elected Sheriff and would save the Talbot County taxpayers about $45K per year. I would put those funds directly back into the Sheriff's Office budget for actual operating or capital needs.

4. Do you support retaining Talbot County's limitation on property-tax revenue growth as currently written? If county expenses grow faster than permitted revenue, which services would you protect first and which would you reconsider?

Yes, I do support retaining Talbot County's limitation on property-tax revenue growth as currently written. Combined with Homestead Credit applications, this is a great protection for Talbot County residents. If county expenses ever grow faster than permitted revenue, I would lean to Talbot County's healthy fund balance first, but do not anticipate that due to Talbot County's "underestimate revenues" and "overestimate expenditures" mentality when generating and approving annual county budgets. We budget like Talbot County families have to budget – not like Washington D.C. and the current State of Maryland does. If ever the event where services needed to be chosen to protect or not, I would first prioritize law enforcement, first responders, and our small (but impactful) inputs to our volunteer fire departments. On capital items to consider, I would push back large capital expenditures that have actual longevity left in them, as that can make a quick dent in an overall expense budget.

5. What information would you require before voting for a new county program, tax incentive, grant-funded position, or capital project?

For a new county program, I personally like to have input from experts in whatever the relative field is, followed by a cost/benefit analysis which normally comes in the form of a feasibility study. For a tax incentive or a capital project, I would like to know that it is going to solve an actual need. For a grant-funded position, I'd like to know that there is both a need and a long-term funding opportunity for the position. In short summary on all, I'd like reassurance that there is either a financial or "human capital" return on the investment.

Growth, Housing, and Infrastructure

6. When new development creates demand for roads, schools, emergency services, and other infrastructure, how should those costs be divided among developers, new residents, and existing taxpayers?

I feel impact fees should appropriately and fairly cover the entry-cost portion for relative infrastructure and capital needs, as property taxation (and most likely income taxation) goes into effect after the development has occurred. Developmental impact fees require careful monitoring and balance. They absolutely impact the price of housing in Talbot County, whether through ownership or in a rental capacity. It is important to note here that impact fees automatically adjust on July 1 of each year for inflationary purposes unless the County Council votes to maintain the prior year's fees.

7. What is the most significant obstacle to increasing housing availability in Talbot County that the County Council can actually address? What specific county policy would you change?

I believe that "affordable housing" means something different to every person and family – it is numerical in nature and unique to everyone. Growth in Talbot County should simply follow the county's Comprehensive Plan. That plan has been carefully designed, with citizen feedback throughout, to properly address growth while still maintaining our rural character. I would continue to do several things that will help citizens attain housing that is affordable to them - keep property taxes low, keep income taxes low, and keep fees low. I have a proven track record as a Talbot County Councilman of doing all three.

8. When economic development conflicts with farmland preservation, environmental protection, or the character of an existing community, what principles should guide the council's decision? Please provide a hypothetical or actual Talbot County example.

The County's Comprehensive Plan should always guide the Council's decision-making. Take Poplar Farm for example. Poplar Farm is a 120-acre plot of land along Oxford Rd. and the Easton Bypass that was slated for single-family home development. A large swath of Talbot County residents were strongly against this proposed development. The Talbot County Council jumped on an opportunity to purchase the property, pre-development directly from the owner/developer. I did vote in favor of the purchase, using budgeted property acquisition funds, which are a yearly budgeted line item. The intent for the property (for the foreseeable future) is for it to be maintained as farmland. Talbot County will realize farming lease revenues from the property which offset the loss in property tax capture. This action addressed the trio of topics mentioned in the question - preservation, environmental, and community character.

Judgment and Accountability

9. Name one decision made by the current County Council with which you disagree. What would you have done differently, and what information supports your position?

I disagreed with the current County Council's overall vote when I first introduced legislation to save Talbot County $46.8M in airport modernization funding by repealing the 2020 County Employee Diversity Statements (DEI) Resolutions. The initial measure failed by a 3-2 vote with the only 2 Council Members voting in favor were myself and Chuck Callahan. The measure eventually passed when I reintroduced it a second time (after Council received a letter from the US Dept. of Transportation threatening present, future and a claw-back of past funding) and it passed in favor of the repeal with a 4-1 vote. I would not change a thing with submitting the DEI repeal legislation as it was my legislation and it saved the Talbot County taxpayer $46.8 million dollars in airport modernization funding. The protection of $46.8 million in federal funding (90% of the project) and not having to use Talbot County taxpayer dollars is simply what supported my position.

10. What have you learned from speaking with Talbot County residents that you did not already believe before beginning your campaign?

As I'm sure is true in most everywhere throughout the US, many Talbot County residents are concerned with national and world issues. I've learned over the years that Talbot County has a very high percentage of informed voters on local matters and, in my opinion, there is nothing more dangerous in an election than an informed voter at the polls. When informed voters are armed with genuine information, good people get elected to local offices.

Priorities and Original Proposals

11. What issue receiving attention in national politics has little relevance to the work of a Talbot County Council member? What important Talbot County issue is receiving too little attention instead?

Most every national (or world) issue has absolutely no relevance to the work of a Talbot County Council member. As in every local race, local issues are on the ballot, and local people are on that ballot. I know the matter is a State of Maryland matter, but I personally feel that the unfunded mandates and the property assessment values being handed down by the State of Maryland onto Maryland counties, including Talbot County, are not getting the attention they deserve – they matter greatly and have direct impact on Talbot County residents. Everyone should know of the State of Maryland's poor fiscal performance under the current leadership. This is the reason why I signed the Republican Talbot County Council Candidate Fiscal Pledge to Talbot County Taxpayers in front of the County Courthouse on 9/21/26 – it contains the facts on the state's poor fiscal performance and it lays out the plan on how we would address it locally.

12. Identify one original proposal that you would personally bring before the council during your first year. What problem would it address, what would it cost, and how would the county implement it?

This may be a stretch, as I'm not sure how many of the other candidates running for Talbot County Council understand the concept of sound money, but I'd love to submit legislation for a percentage of our fund balance to be converted to gold. It would allow for a long-term hedge against inflation (at least for the percentage allocated), provide investment diversification, and protect long-term tax dollar purchasing power (again, at least for the percentage allocated). The majority of the cost is a simple trade – federal reserve notes (fiat) for actual money (gold) through a trusted supplier. Buyer's premiums and storage would be your ancillary (one-time and possible reoccurring if vaulted offsite) cost of entry. The implementation avenue would simply be a legislative bill and its cost would be dependent on the approved investment percentage.

Closing Questions

13. Is there another Talbot County issue you believe voters should consider when choosing among the candidates?

I'd like to revisit a few previous points here, but elaborate a bit more. It is a fact that the State of Maryland is in very poor financial shape - so much so that a $3 billion dollar shortfall is expected by FY '28 with no end in sight. The State of Maryland and their poor financial stewardship, unfunded mandates, and the property assessment values being handed down to Talbot County taxpayers should be at the top of mind for every voter in Talbot County. They should carefully choose State Senators and State Delegates that will not participate in this financial recklessness. The Talbot County Council is not able to change irresponsible state legislator decision-making, but they can negate their damage by keeping county property taxes low, keeping county income taxes low, and keeping county fees low. I will again reiterate that this is the reason why I signed the Republican Talbot County Council Candidate Fiscal Pledge to Talbot County Taxpayers on 9/21/26.

14. Finally, use this space to explain why Talbot County voters should choose you to represent them on the County Council.

I feel voters in Talbot County should choose me as one of their County Council Members because I will continue to advance common-sense legislation that keeps Talbot County a great place to live, work, and play - and that align with what I call my 5 F's – Faith, Family, Freedom, Fiscal Responsibility, and Fighting for you! I believe that our rights and freedoms are given to us by God and are enshrined in our US and MD Constitutions. I believe it is the primary responsibility of any elected official to firmly protect both.

Thank you for the opportunity to complete this well thought out questionnaire!

I hope to earn your vote!

Dave Stepp