

DON OBER, Candidate for Mercer County Commissioner responds to League of Women Voter's Questionnaire

Please explain why you are running and describe the personal and professional experiences/skills that you possess that make you uniquely qualified to serve as County Commissioner.

Answer: As a successful small business owner serving the Mercer County area for over 48 years, I have gained the public's trust running my own business. I feel uniquely qualified to transfer that trust into my position as a public servant at a time when public trust is at an all-time low point. Helping organizations and individuals make purchasing decisions has been an important part of my job. The current board consists of seven members, who are all from one party. I don't believe the current situation instills trust because the important component of checks and balances is missing. Honest checks and balances are a benchmark of our democracy and only a two-party solution can offer true diversity and transparency. The public deserves to trust that those making financial decisions come from diverse backgrounds and experiences, and that includes political party.

What challenges do you feel need to be prioritized in Mercer County in the next three years, why, and how would you address them?

Answer: Small business is the backbone of our economic system. For far too long small business has been left out in decision making in our county. I am proud member of NFIB and a business owner myself for over 48 years. For our county economy to prosper and grow, the county must support the small business owners needs as well as those of large corporations. As commissioner, I plan to look deeply into ways the county can consolidate and streamline mandates, licensing, red tape, and paperwork for these businesses. Additionally, the budget levy this year increased 6.23 % at a time when family and small business budgets are strained. I believe the county needs to look at ways to do thing more efficiently. This budget relies on drawing 34.8M from surplus. This is a dangerous budgetary practice that will only make future budgets difficult to control without severe increases. This budget may balance on paper but only because Mercer relies on a 6.23% increase and a substantial draw on surplus.

Do you think there is enough citizen participation in the County Commissioners' planning, policymaking and oversight roles and what actions, if any, would you pursue to promote greater public involvement

Answer: No, there is not enough citizen participation. With nearly 400,000 residents, having only a handful of people attend meetings is not representative. In 2026, it is unacceptable that meetings are not consistently live streamed and easily accessible online. We need to modernize by broadcasting and archiving meetings and providing clear, easy-to-understand summaries of major decisions, especially budget items. When people can access and understand what's happening, participation increases and trust is restored. Public comment on budget decisions should not only be tolerated but encouraged. Lack of trust and suspicion rises when there is one party making all the decisions, checks and balances are badly needed.

The Corrections Department is one of the largest line items in the county budget at close to \$40 million. The jail is over 120 years old and in conditions described as inhumane and decrepit. There have been prior proposals to transfer inmates out of county, or of possible regionalization of detention facilities. How important it is to resolve this situation, which is now in litigation, and do you have any proposals on how to do it?

Answer: These accusations of conditions at the facility being inhumane are serious and must be addressed. We have a constitutional and moral obligation to ensure safe and humane treatment during incarceration. At the same time, simply transferring inmates and costs to another county is not a real solution that would leave Mercer at the mercy of another county for future costs we will have no control over. We need to fix our own system! That means insisting leadership improves staffing, morale, and operations, while enforcing accountability to ensure taxpayer dollars are spent properly and improvements are actually completed. We should evaluate ways to modernize and increase efficiencies to improve conditions while controlling long-term costs.

What is the role of the County Commissioners Board in evaluating and addressing the economic, public safety, and social impact of ICE (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement) policies on the local community?

Our county, state, & federal law enforcement agencies should work together, not against each other. Clear communication & coordination are essential to keeping our communities safe & avoiding confusion between agencies. Communication technologies can enable real time communications between officers of different agencies. In many cases this does not presently exist & can cause misunderstandings & confusion. This issue should not be politicized, but handled through practical cooperation that supports officers doing their jobs while upholding the rule of law. As well, there must be accountability & transparency to maintain public trust. One way to improve public trust is to insist all internal affairs departments include public participation.