

GRAND RAPIDS PRESS
July 2010 M-Live QUESTIONS

1. County officials say 2011 is likely to bring another year of budget cuts with preliminary estimates showing a \$9 million budget gap. What cuts would you make to close the gap?
I think it would take a combination of several cuts. I would look to some of the following to reach that level of cuts:
 - a. *Freeze employee health benefit increases*
 - b. *Freeze employee pay increases*
 - c. *Go defined contribution with pension plan—rather than current defined benefit plan*
 - d. *Continue to look at ways to streamline service presentation. Look at ways of combining management services such as finance, IT, Human Services between the county and the enterprise operations.*
 - e. *Re-organize any and all service providers to leverage best practices from other local governments.*
 - f. *Possibly reduce the sheriff's department and correction center staffing since this is the largest number of employees*

2. The county has more than \$50 million in reserves for cash flow and emergencies. Do you think taxes should be cut to refund these reserves to taxpayers?
No, the county is the only local government that is operating in the black, and has not had to seek a tax increase to balance its books. That is partially because of the reserves that prior county commissions built. The reserves allow us to save several million dollars in interest rates on our bonds each year. We need the reserves to be available for a major disaster or emergency that no city could handle because of depleted funds in their reserves. At least one local government needs to have a source of funds to address unexpected emergencies.

3. When it comes to salaries and benefits for public workers, should workers share more health care costs. Should the pension system be changed in any way?
Yes, county workers should share more health care costs. The average worker in non-government employment shares anywhere from 10% to 25% of the premiums for health insurance or share a higher co-pay. The Kent County employees should be expected to pay a similar portion of the health care insurance premiums and/or a similar portion of co-pays or deductibles.
Yes, the pension system should be changed from the current defined benefit plan to a defined contribution plan. There are various ways that can be done such that it can be phased in and the current employees be "grandfathered in" under the old plan. But, in order to better budget for the costs of pension benefits, and to hold off on the rapidly escalating costs of the defined benefit plan, we need to make a significant change to a defined contribution plan. Most other employers—non-profits and private businesses have made the switch some years ago.

4. Do you support spending county tax dollars to fund the county's Purchase of Development Rights program?

No, I do not support the decision made by the county commission last December pledging county general fund dollars for funding 3 years of the county's Purchase of Development Rights program. I don't think there are sufficient funds in the general fund to add this new endeavor. I think it is unwise to use general fund tax funds for such a controversial program. Taking this action without constituent approval is simply bringing more opposition to the PDR concept. I suggest the following plan instead:

- *A first priority is to maintain Kent County's membership in the Grand Valley Metropolitan Planning Council. Our best hope of continuing the emphasis on importance of the farming industry in our county is to maintain the county's active involvement and participation in the one body that has begun to plan and think regionally. Our county administration and commissioners must be at the same table that cities and townships are in order to influence decisions that affect farming and farm industries.*
- *A second priority for county commissioners is to begin to think more broadly and long term about how the farmland industry can be preserved and allowed to grow. We need to develop an aggressive program of community education about the many benefits of keeping the farming industry vibrant. There are numerous benefits to all the other industries and community activities from a vibrant farming industry, and those activities must be brought along as partners to sell this program to the broader community. We must tap the interests of the environmental activists, public transportation activists, economic development activists, government infrastructure spending watchdogs, migrant farm worker organizations, and public education activists. All of these can and must become allies in a program of community education about the benefits of farmland preservation.*
- *With the above accomplished much better than today I feel we can safely go to the population for a small millage to fund farmland preservation. We need to let the people decide whether it is important enough to find sources of dedicated funding to get it accomplished long-term. Let's not take that decision away from the people. We can combine the interests of people concerned about the continued increase of infrastructure costs, urban sprawl, environmental issues, public transportation, inner city school systems, county wide economic development, and government cost overruns to sell the concept. Perhaps a request for dedicated funding for county parkland upgrades and maintenance could be included in this community request.*
- *I would suggest the best use of Open Space and Farmland Preservation Foundation money is for the above educational and advocacy efforts, and not to fund elections of individual county commission candidates who will vote in favor of using county general funds for farmland preservation. Working to get individual commissioners elected is an endless battle every two years. I think it is actually working to the*

opposition's favor, since the PDR opponents' fund raising capabilities have been enhanced more than ever this year. With the focus being on individual candidate election races—and not on the broader community issues—it is easy for the opposition to focus their efforts. That is not accomplishing a long-term fix. We need a long-term sustainable program of active education and advocacy for farmland preservation that will take hard work, collaborative networking of all elected officials, and rallying all the different interests to get behind this issue once and for all, and get it out of the every two year county commission race arena.

5. There is \$200,000 remaining from a Grand Rapids Community Foundation grant to fund the PDR contingent on the county matching funds. Do you support public funding at a level necessary to qualify for the remaining grant money?

No. The reason for this answer is based on the reasons given above. I don't think spending general fund money on the PDR program is something that constituents currently support. Plus, the county does not have sufficient general funds to accomplish much good with a 3 year program of small farmland purchases. What is needed is a longer term approach based on an assertive program of community education and persuasion. Perhaps the Foundation funds could be put to better use helping to conduct such a study and campaign, rather than pressuring individual county commissioners to accept funds based on pressure of a few foundation board members. While I am an advocate of the PDR program, I don't think we can accomplish sufficient preservation with a 3-year matched funding program. Our progress up to this point has been somewhat scattered and minimal. We need something that will convince voters of the need to preserve open space and farm land, and give voters the choice of spending additional tax funds for a longer-term source of funds than a 3-year small community foundation matching grant.