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## ELECTION EXTRA

# Cowan Comments

*An independent Look at Cowan Today. Not Affiliated with Any Group. Published Monthly  
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## The Great Cowan Political Debate

by Patrick Elb

On Saturday, the 11<sup>th</sup> of July 2009, the city of Cowan held its first ever mayoral debate. Sponsored by *Cowan Comments*, the debate was held at the Cowan Center for the Arts Theater and was moderated by the editor of *Cowan Comments*, Mr. Thomas Wagner. Four of the five candidates chose to attend – incumbent Mayor Joe Ed Williams, retired Defense Department employee Tom Mercier, former municipal worker Joe W. Holman, Jr. and local businessman JM Hogan McDonald. Invited to attend but refusing to participate was former mayor, Raymond “Chick” Tucker.

The theatre stage was set with a podium at the center with two chairs on one side and three on the other. In front of each chair was a name plate, identifying the seated candidate. At about 4:15 pm, the debate began with Moderator Wagner reminding the candidates of the strict time limits – two minutes per response -- and the fact that all questions posed were submitted in writing from the roughly fifty people in attendance. He added he would read all questions after they were pulled to make sure they were appropriate to the proceedings.

In the light of fairness, the moderator asked two young girls from the audience to come up to the podium and to pull the written questions from a basket. In the ninety minutes of the debate, seven questions were randomly pulled from the basket and then each candidate was allowed a three minute conclusion to make his case.

Here are the questions and the responses of the candidates:

### 1. “What contributions have you made to Cowan in the past two years?”

Mayor Williams cited the facts that in his three year tenure as mayor, nine new businesses had come to Cowan; improvements had been made to the water plant; the police department had received numerous grants and lap top computers; the city had received a much needed back hoe and dump truck; and in general “Cowan was quieter and safer.”

Mr. Mercier focused his response on his research into bringing grocery giant, Publix, to town. He mentioned he even contact their corporate offices about bringing a store to Cowan, but he candidly admitted he was not successful in convincing them to do so.

Mr. Holman was quick to take much of the credit for Mayor Williams’ achievements, referencing his career working for the city without “a single sick day.” Obviously proud of his family roots in Cowan, he described himself as a “4<sup>th</sup> generation Cowanite” who has prayed for the city’s future.

Mr. McDonald informed the crowd he had created the largest tax base in the past fifteen years for Cowan by allowing his family’s farmland to be annexed and turned into a subdivision.

### 2. “What would you do to provide a place for seniors to walk indoors?”

Mr. Mercier answered first by saying Monterrey Station was the only building large enough to accommodate such an exercise and “the city would have to budget for anything else.”

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## Independent Reaction to the Debate

Patrick Kelb, an independent journalist from Chattanooga approached Cowan Comments shortly after the July issue was delivered. Patrick had never been to Cowan and did not know any of the candidates. I thought it would be interesting to have him do an article from the perspective of a complete outsider. As our logo promises, his view represents “An independent look at Cowan today.”

What follows are two articles that he submitted just as we went to press. Both articles represent the thoughts of the author after attending the Great Cowan Political Debate, and do not necessarily represent the view of Cowan Comments.

## The Empty Chair

by Patrick Elb

Days before the mayoral debate in Cowan, it was rumored that former mayor Raymond “Chick” Tucker would not be attending. The reasons for such an omission were varied, but taking the possibility seriously, I called Mr. Tucker’s home the Monday before the debate and was granted a one-on-one interview. On Wednesday, the 8<sup>th</sup> of July, I sat down with Chick Tucker at his home in Cowan.

Sitting comfortably at his kitchen table, Chick Tucker and I began a friendly and candid discussion that lasted the better part of two hours. The first and most important question I had for Mr. Tucker referred to why he chose not to attend Saturday night’s debate. With five candidates vying for the same position, I would think having the rare opportunity to present one’s case in a clear and orderly manner would be a boon to one’s campaign. Naturally, I needed an answer. “I’ve had a bunch of people ask me to attend,” he said frankly. But “if they’re going to vote you, they’re going to vote for you.” Mrs. Tucker, who was also in attendance for a portion of the interview, mentioned that the candidate had a hard time hearing and she didn’t wish for him to be in a situation where he could not understand the questions posed. “I don’t hear too good,” Chick confirmed. He quickly added that his “people” had encouraged him to not attend. When requested to identify the reasons his “people” would do such a thing, Chick admitted he did not know. “I don’t know what’s going on anymore,” he added candidly.

Moving on, I asked Mr. Tucker what he would like to do in his first 100 days in office should he be elected. “This town is really drying up.” Mentioning a need for repairing local sidewalks and installing a second water tank, Chick also criticized the Cowan Police Department for making the town a “speed trap.” “I will get it straightened out,” he stated, “but it may be harder than I think.” I asked him about why his agenda may be difficult to realize. “You’ve got to have a good board to work with.” Mr. Tucker did not identify to whom on the

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# The Debate (cont.)

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Mr. Holman turned to the schools as the source. According to him, schools and some churches would be able to allow seniors to walk there. Rather bizarrely, he added, "senior men could handle it better than senior women."

Mr. McDonald, on the other hand, was quick to rebuff Mr. Holman's school suggestion, stating schools wouldn't "take on that liability." He looked to the state and federal governments as a possible solution, suggesting that Congressman Gordon could assist in finding funding.

Mayor Williams readily admitted that this was "a tough question," as the school system and the churches wouldn't work as an answer, and the city couldn't afford to construct an area for seniors to walk indoors. But he did admit that the Monterrey Station idea would work.

### 3. What are your plans to bring industries to Cowan that would provide tax-paying employees?

Mr. Holman said bluntly, "the economy is kaput," but there is "money waiting to take" in this regard he pointed to \$27,000 generated by recycling in Cowan and nearby Winchester in 2008. Instead of sending those funds to the state, he suggested the two towns split that money and keep it for themselves. Also, Mr. Holman would like to see more efficient work habits and preventive maintenance on city vehicles.

[It must be stated that after Mr. Holman's answer, the moderator quickly re-stated the question to ensure it was clear what the issue was.]

Mr. McDonald then gave his response, centering on the incentives Cowan must offer to potential industry. Businesses must have "green pieces of land," which Cowan has in abundance. Also, the cost of living is much lower in the south, which could provide a lure for Northern businesses to re-locate locally. As Mayor, McDonald would go to other places and show Cowan off.

Mayor Williams wasted no time in saying it is "real hard work" to sell a town. He cited his efforts to bring Dollar General to Cowan and also his interest in possibly having Volkswagen locate a supplier for its Chattanooga plant in Cowan.

Mr. Mercier referenced his career with the Department of Defense, suggesting the aero-space industry and small parts manufacturers would find Cowan ideal for their purposes. Also, he would like to see the city limits expanded to take in more land. Frankly, he stated, he would like to "entice people into this community, but it's going to take time to do that."

### 4. "How differently will you run Cowan and why?"

The first thing Mr. McDonald said he would do is conduct an "audit from an independent agency" of the city finances. Secondly, he would review the last four city budgets. Thirdly, he would look at the fire department needs with the fire chief. Fourthly, he would review the sewer department performance and the history of water rates.

Mayor Williams confidently stated he would continue to run the city the same way he has been for the past three years. "Each department head knows their jobs."

Mr. Mercier said he would follow the city charter, take on all city issues, operate within the municipal budget, prioritize the problems facing Cowan, and strategize 3-5 years out as well as 5-10 years out.

"The citizens are what make Cowan special," Mr. Holman said. "The people tell government what works and what doesn't." He added he would convince business to come to town. "Trust me."

### 5. "Consider yourself the CEO of a company with a \$1.4 million annual budget and 30 full time employees (mirroring Cowan itself). How would you act?"

Mayor Williams succinctly said he would "distribute funds in a useful way."

Mr. Mercier was quick to reference his work experience with the government, handling large contracts and complex budgets. His chief concern was the fact that Cowan has eight police officers but only \$400 budgeted for training each year. He would work to remedy these numbers.

Mr. Holman said he would "set standards and have a mission." He recounted when he worked for a large company in Chicago, he supervised 130 people and had to work with an \$11 million budget. He

accused Cowan's Police Department of working without a budget for the past few months. "Something's wrong somewhere."

Mr. McDonald, with eight years on the county commission, said he was used to working with budgets of \$42-\$50 million and that what the mayor needed to do was to keep employees here and generate revenue.

### 6. "Have you made promises to certain segments of the community in exchange for votes?"

(This question was the only one asked to elicit a vocal response from the audience.)

Mr. Mercier admitted he had heard stories around town but emphatically stated he had made no promises to anybody. He has not made any promises to hire or fire anyone.

Mr. Holman started his answer, "I can't promise something I cannot do." He said only the mayor has the power to hire or fire, and as he was not mayor, he could do such things. He quickly added, "I haven't promised anything to anybody, and you can take that to the bank."

Mr. McDonald's response was simply that he would make sure Cowan gets the best for its budget.

Mayor Williams centered his answer on compensation by reminding the audience that the city council votes on raises. He too stated that he had not made any promises to any groups or individuals.

### 7. "What qualifies you to be mayor?"

Mr. Holman cited his military experience, acting as a sergeant in charge of eleven men. He again referenced his work history as a supervisor of 130 workers. Change was needed, he asserted. "New ideas will come with a new leader."

Mr. McDonald said "I'm running for a job." Proclaiming his need to help others, he said he had worked with the State of Tennessee in the past and could open doors for Cowan.

Mayor Williams recalled his experience in local politics: eleven years on the county commission, serving on six of the nine committees in the county; three years as mayor, when Cowan has experienced growth while other local communities have not.

Mr. Mercier touted his training, education, and experience as assets. He said he had been a part of Cowan for three years and was "here to stay."

In the end, each candidate was allowed a final statement.

Mr. Holman spoke of his goals for Cowan, listing a grocery store, drug store, and dollar store as needed businesses. He also expressed his desire to have "long term investments" come to town and to get "taxes in order."

Mr. McDonald expressed his belief in simple common sense, with an open door policy and fresh ideas.

Mr. Mercier encouraged those in attendance to register to vote and said, "What you've heard here today is the sound of freedom."

Mayor Williams had the last word by saying city hall under his administration was open to the public and that he would continue to work with the city council.

All the candidates present offered to answer any further questions the public may have after the debate.

Cowan is a town of nearly 1700 people, 1250 of whom are registered to vote. During the last mayor's race, the victor won by just 18 votes. On August 6<sup>th</sup>, Cowan will go to the polls again and have five Mayoral candidates from which to choose. As Mayor Williams said during the debate, "There is no other place like Cowan."

From an outsider's perspective, it is noteworthy that the city of Cowan would have five candidates for Mayor. The candidates have varying degrees of experience and charisma. A couple of the candidates answered the questions simply and clearly, not needing the two minutes allotted. One candidate in particular appeared to not understand the questions posed to him and relied mostly on slogans and platitudes as opposed to facts and figures. One candidate chose not to attend at all. No matter which candidate for Mayor one chooses, one must bear in mind which of these gentlemen is best suited to keep Cowan safe, secure, and prosperous in a time when those things are most precious.

## The Empty Chair (cont.)

(Continued from page 1)

board he was referring.

Anyone driving around Cowan can see Chick Tucker's campaign yard signs dotted along the main thoroughfare. "He's back and ready to make a difference," is his slogan and is printed under his name. I asked Chick what "difference" he had in mind. Once in office, he advised, "I'm going to ask the people what they want, and then I'm going to give it to them." I asked him if the people had told him during his campaign what they wanted, but his response was simply, "The people just vote because they want the man."

Naturally, in this current economy, jobs and finances are on the minds of many people. I asked Mr. Tucker for his plan to secure Cowan's financial success. "I had a grocery store coming in last time," he said referring to his time as mayor. He also seemed keen on making Monterrey Mills a factory again. His plan is to put two factories into the Monterrey Mills building – one on the first floor and another on the second. When asked what factories he had in mind, he could not say. When asked about how he was going to put businesses into a building not owned by the city, he simply stated he did not wish to talk about Cowan Development Company, which now owns the structure.

One topic Chick Tucker is not afraid to talk about is his health. Relying on a cane to move around and a large hearing aid to hear, the over 80 year old candidate looks to be quite frail. And he readily admitted, "I resigned once due to my health." He cited the fact he has had four heart by-passes. Also, it appeared during the course of our conversation that he did not know what year it was. Chick spoke highly of a business he was getting into involving the farming of worms for bait purposes. Mrs. Tucker, who was sitting at the table at this time, rapidly interjected, "That was in 1976." The mayoral candidate then brought up crime in the area and proceeded to talk about a trio of criminals who were convicted of killing a local farmer. Mrs. Tucker again interceded, "That was in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Chick." While his physical weaknesses are all too apparent, his grasp on time is a bit tenuous as well.

I decided on a straight-forward and simple question, "Why should you be mayor and not the others?" Mr. Tucker did not discuss the other candidates by name except for the incumbent, Joe Ed Williams: "All he wants is money. He's a money hog." When pressed for his reasons for stating such a thing, Chick would not respond. Changing the subject, he stated enthusiastically, "I like to help people. No job is too large or too small." He recounted the fact that he knew former governors Ned Ray McWhirter and Don Sundquist personally and was able to bring grant money to Cowan for sewer line extensions and a walking trail. Clearly, Chick Tucker had powerful friends during his time in city hall.

But does he have what it takes to be mayor again? In Mr. Tucker's living room is a framed proclamation from the Tennessee House of Representatives, signed by then Speaker Jimmy Naifeh himself. In this document, the former mayor is lauded for his many contributions to the city of Cowan. While it is plain to see that Mr. Tucker has had numerous accomplishments during his political campaign, I can't help but feel that his time has come and gone. With over eight decades of life experience behind him and five terms as Cowan's mayor, Chick Tucker can look back at a long and provocative career. He can be a historical resource for the area, as he has been a major player, but his tenure in the political limelight is drawing to a close. With failing health and difficulty separating the past from the present, Mr. Tucker should focus more on being an elder statesman who can look back proudly on his achievements. As important as Chick Tucker has been to the community of Cowan, perhaps he could better contribute to this town's future by acting in another capacity.

*For photos from the debate, please visit  
[www.cowancomments.com](http://www.cowancomments.com)*

## Who's running for Alderman?

By Tom Wagner

For some, the political campaign season has been hard and long, but now just over two weeks from the election, I have still never met four of the five candidates for Alderman. I don't know what any of them plan for our City, and I worry that three of these unknowns are about to be elected and will pass our City Budget and laws for the next four years.

The five candidates include Joyce Brown who is currently on the Council; Wesley Garner who has run a political ad in Cowan Comments, but remains quiet as to who he is and what he stands for; Ransom Green who has placed some signs around town; Charles Solie and Lee Roy Wilkinson who have no signs or literature out.

I am told that many, or perhaps all of these candidates have lived in Cowan all or most of their lives, and that some have held office in town before. This is encouraging, but does not tell us anything about their current plan or their intentions. Since they ran, there are hundreds of new voters in Cowan. New voters are far more likely to actually cast a ballot than some of the "Cowaners" (People who were born and raised in Cowan).

Cowan is a Tennessee City on the way up. We are not a sleepy City waiting for something to happen. Our city is awake with a new vibrancy that our City Council must take hold of and move forward. I'm sorry that the people we will vote for to help move us forward and improve our lot in the world have chosen to sit the season out in apathetic silence. I had hoped that these new people would have embraced our new vitality and given us some reason to hope for more positive forward thinking leadership.

I hope that the "Cowaners" will come out and vote in large numbers this time. You are the only ones who know the candidates for Alderman. Those of us "Outsiders" who have chosen to make our home here will depend on your leadership and choices to ensure that Cowan gets the best possible representation.

## Word on the Street

By Tom Wagner

Word on the street will be a new monthly article targeting rumors, myths and misconceptions we find. We begin this new department with a news release from the Chief of Police, Robert Reynolds. Future articles will answer questions from readers and explore information we hear on the street.

NEWS RELEASE:

**"Well the Cowan City Election is coming up and Cowan Police Chief Robert Reynolds said that he, the City Recorder, and other Cowan Officers are being targeted for firing by a Candidate for Mayor. Politics are politics the Chief said, but when you start personal verbal attacks on police officers, stalking police officers, soliciting Police Officers to defame the Chief and violating TCA codes then it is time to put a stop to it.**

**Chief Reynolds stated that he could not go into detail but can confirm that an investigation was opened 2 months ago by his department, in regards to alleged violation of State Law. He stated that one of the candidates is continually defaming his character and that of individual members of his force."**

For the August issue, Cowan Comments is researching the claim by several candidates that Cowan has become a speed trap. One candidate even suggested that vehicles with Seawane license plates are being specifically targeted.

# Voting Calendar

Sun	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat
<b>July 2009</b>					17 First Day for Early Voting 8:00—4:30	18 Saturday Voting 8:00—12:00
19	20 Early Voting 8:00—4:30	21 Early Voting 8:00—4:30	22 Early Voting 8:00—4:30	23 Early Voting 8:00—4:30	24 Early Voting 8:00—4:30	25 Saturday Voting 8:00—12:00
26	27 Early Voting 8:00—4:30	28 Early Voting 8:00—4:30	29 Early Voting 8:00—4:30	30 Early Voting 8:00—4:30	31 Early Voting 8:00—4:30	
<b>August 2009</b>						1 Last Day to Vote Early 8:00—1:00
2	3	4	5	6 <b>Election Day</b> 7 am—7 pm Cowan Elementary School	7	8

**All early voting** is done at the  
Franklin County Election Commission,  
839 Dinah Shore Blvd, Suite 1,  
Winchester, TN  
Phone: 931-967-1893