



QUESTIONS FOR AMES CITY COUNCIL CANDIDATES

All answers are posted verbatim; the Chamber did not edit responses, nor correct typos or grammatical errors.

The following responses are from Tom Wacha:

1. What do you see as the top three issues facing the City of Ames?

The top three issues are: the need to improve the business climate in Ames, the need to address the increasing crime rate, and the need to make city government more effective.

Improving the business climate: Like it or not, justified or not, we are suffering from a reputation that Ames is discouraging new business. For me, it's all about people, and people can't live and contribute to a community's well being unless they have jobs. Jobs are provided by businesses. So promoting a healthy business climate is a key goal of mine. Doing so will take work, because perceptions don't go away on their own.

Ames is well insulated to economic downturns due to our large number of public sector jobs, but we have lost many of those jobs since 2000, and we will continue to see public jobs lost into the foreseeable future. These job cuts are far reaching. They have contributed to declining enrollment numbers in the Ames Community School District, which have forced the closing of neighborhood schools. They also cut economic activity in our community, which limits our ability to maintain our quality of life. Because of public sector job losses, we must focus on the private sector if we are to maintain, let alone grow, our current population, neighborhood schools, economic position, and quality of life.

How do we do this? First, we need to change our attitude toward business. We need to value our businesses, their concerns, and their needs. This is not to say the city should do everything businesses ask, but we need to start asking "why not" instead of "why" when it comes to those requests. Second, we need to simplify the process for building and expanding businesses in Ames, and we need to apply the policies we have uniformly. We have regulations for a reason, and we need them, but we can and must do a better job of making those regulations clear upfront and not singling out projects to add regulations to.

Addressing the increasing crime rate: This is one of the most frequently mentioned issues people talk to me about as I walk around our great city. People are scared and upset about the recent jump in violent crime in our community, and, as the father of two young children, I understand completely. I've talked to the Chief of Police about this very topic, and I agree with him that one way to combat this is to foster a sense of community at the neighborhood level. In other words, know your neighbors. Pay attention to your neighborhood. If something is out of place, you'll know it faster than the police will. We also need to continue the proactive approach the Ames Police Department is taking to preventing crime such as the Iowa Crime Free Multi-Housing Program. In this program, the police officers work with property managers to stop crime before it

starts. To further their efforts, we need to ensure our police department is well funded. Finally, we need to examine all of our city programs to see if there is any correlation between actions we are taking and the increase in crime (see question four below).

Making city government more effective and relevant: The people of Ames deserve the most effective and efficient government they can get. I'm for a council that councils (in other words – advises and provides leadership). I'm for a city manager that manages (in other words acts as the CEO of the city, running the day-to-day operations) and I'm for letting the city staff do their job. Furthermore, we need to work to eliminate the tie votes we have experienced on the city council. A system that can result in so many tie votes is not efficient. We need to make better use of technology to get citizens involved in government. This can be done by revamping the city's website through using social networking sites, partnering with neighborhood associations, and having off-site council meetings. The latter might foster greater citizen participation.

2. What ideas do you have for growth and economic development in Ames?

I get frustrated when I hear members of our City Council say we are doing everything we can to promote business in Ames. To me that means that either we've run out of ideas or we don't want to put forth the effort needed to improve and grow. Ames is a great place to live but just imagine how much better it could be. I envision an Ames that takes full advantage of the high tech and entrepreneurship resources that ISU, the ISU Research Park, and The Papajohn Center for Entrepreneurship offer to become the high tech center of the region. Ankeny is currently attracting high tech companies to their community by promoting their proximity to ISU. We are getting beat at our own game and that will change when I'm elected.

To promote growth and economic development in Ames we must first change our attitude toward growth and business. Growth is to be respected, not feared. We can grow smartly and responsibly without losing our sense of community. It does not have to be an either-or proposition. I also envision an Ames that grows to become the cultural center of the region.

We don't have any large industrial lots for potential companies to build on, so I am in favor of making the proposed Sunrise Prairie Business Park a reality as soon as possible.

We need to attract travelers off of Interstate 35 so they too will come into our community to spend money at our businesses, which in turn will support our human services programs and enhance our quality of life programs. Remember, through the local option sales tax revenue that shopping brings, we are able to do so much more. I'm not saying the proposed regional commercial center at Interstate 35 and 13th street is a perfect proposal, but, given the history of the project, it is the only such proposal Ames will see for many years. This effort combined with the fact that Ames strives to be a regional center, and the fact that such a regional commercial center has been in the LUPP for years, tells me that it is the best proposal we have.

3. What has been your personal involvement in economic development and growth for Ames?

I currently work as the Vice President of Operations at Quality Attributes Software (QAS), a small software company here in Ames. I'm quite proud of the work I've done there and believe that my work has helped the company grow from a four person company when I first started there in 2004 to a 25-person company today. While I'm not an owner, I am a manager at QAS and I know first hand the day-to-day struggles of a small company.

In addition, I am a graduate of both Leadership Ames and the Ames Citizens Academy, am a member of the Young Professionals of Ames, a regular participant in Chamber events, and I shop local unless I'm traveling out of the area and have no other choice.

4. What are your views on the City's rental assistance program?

The city's rental assistance program is part of a federal program known as "section eight" in which, on the national scale, low income housing projects are being destroyed in the hopes that the residents, who are given reduced rates at other apartments, will have a better opportunity to live the American dream. I am in favor of that concept as well as providing assistance to members of our community on fixed income or who are disabled and cannot afford rent. Ensuring our low income and disabled residents have a safe place to live is in the best interest of everyone.

The other issue related to this question, for which I think you are really asking, is a very complex and delicate one and that is the suggested relationship between the Cities' rental assistance program and the increase in crime we have experienced in Ames. While connecting the two may be the easy thing to do, I don't believe it is the fair thing to do. Having said that, the link is being made by members of our community. I know this because I hear about it quite frequently.

I think it is the duty of elected representatives to look out for the public's safety, and if there is a chance that actions the City is taking are increasing crime then I feel those actions need to be examined. If, after making that examination we find no connection, we need to make that public and actively work to dispel the rumors of a connection. If, on the other hand, we do find a connection, then I will support modifying the responsible programs. I see very few positive outcomes that are not outweighed by violent crime as a side effect.

5. What are your views on the Land Use Policy Plan?

Our Land Use Policy Plan (LUPP) is a very well thought out and thorough document that serves as a blueprint for how Ames is to reflect or vision of land use for the future. It was developed in the early 1990's and needs to be updated to reflect the current needs and desires of our city. The LUPP must be treated as a guideline that reflects our goals, not as an un-editable document that drives our goals.

Specifically, we need to examine how the LUPP addresses residential growth in our community. The moment the City (and the residents of Ames through a bond issue) decided to spend taxpayer money on the Ada Hayden Heritage Park we drastically altered where residential growth will naturally occur in Ames. Ada Hayden is a beautiful park that we should all be proud of, and it's no wonder people want to live near it. We can't be surprised that growth is now gravitating to the North and try to prevent it because it was not a part of the LUPP, which was developed years before Ada Hayden Heritage Park was even considered.

6. What image do you think Ames has for potential developers or new businesses? What would you do to change or improve this image?

I answered this question in my response to question one above. I believe changing the current image that Ames is discouraging to new business must change. I also believe that it is the top issue facing our City.

7. What are your thoughts on financing needs of the City of Ames, including water, electricity, library and parking?

Given the current economic climate nationally, financing large expenditures will be a real challenge in coming years. I consider myself to be fiscally conservative but I am also someone who is willing to make investments in our community when necessary and when they benefit the community as a whole.

I believe Ames does a very good job as a City of being fiscally conservative. Our bonds have been rated Aaa by Moodys for years and it is important that we maintain that high rating as we assess new capital needs.

Our need for a new water treatment facility and our need to increase peak electric demand in the near future are truly needs that we must find ways to finance. I will work to keep the impact of doing so to a minimum for the ratepayers of Ames. I believe a new library or downtown parking ramp will be issues that will need to be put to bond, and, while I am in favor of those projects in principal, it will ultimately be up to the citizens of Ames as to whether they believe they are a good use of taxpayer money.

8. What challenges do you think there are in developing the Main Street Cultural District as a residential center as well as a commercial/entertainment center?

I am a huge supporter of Main Street. I live just a few blocks from downtown, my kids attend preschool downtown, and we do much of our shopping downtown. I'll answer this question in two parts.

The challenges of making Main Street a residential center are large. We currently have apartments above Main Street businesses that are competing with the many other apartments in our community. In addition, we have a village concept development in Somerset, which attracts people who want to live above a retail business they operate. For these reasons, I don't think we should focus on Main Street as a residential center per se.

The challenges of making Main Street a commercial/entertainment center are much more addressable. I believe they are parking and a need for renovated or new facilities. The City Council has been presented with several proposals, including one to rebuild the Town Center building on Main Street, so I don't believe we will have difficulty attracting developments from occurring on Main Street provided we can address the parking issue. I believe parking on Main Street can be improved significantly even if a parking ramp is not built by developing a permit system so that employees of Main Street businesses can park for a monthly rate without having to constantly feed meters or move their cars. We should also consider allowing for free parking during peak shopping times to help Main Street businesses attract customers.

9. What processes would you like to see in place to proceed with an Inter-modal Transportation Hub?

I'm excited for the proposed Inter-modal Transportation Hub and very much hope we receive the federal funding for the project. Campustown has the most unrealized potential of any neighborhood in Ames and that facility will go a long way to improving Campustown by providing much needed parking and by serving as a gathering point for students, residents, and professionals.

If we get the funding, I'd like to see the project move forward as quickly as possible. We need to build upon the cooperative effort that created the proposal and ensure that its development, along with plans for further improvements in Campustown, are conducted in a way that ensures all stakeholders (students, ISU, area residents, business owners, and the city) have the opportunity to be a part of the process.

10. How can the City be involved in encouraging the development of additional/renovated conference space?

Sufficient convention space is important to Ames, and to Iowa State University, as conventions bring in thousands of people who spend many thousands of dollars in our community each year.

The Ames Convention and Visitors Bureau has recently commissioned a study to survey stakeholders to determine if Ames needs a new convention center and if so how, when, and where it should be done. The City has been a partner in this process and the final report is due in October of 2009. The City needs to continue to be part of these discussions and any plans that take shape as a result.

11. What would you do to support the existing business community in Ames?

I'd start by sending a strong message to the existing business community: You are important, you are appreciated, and we thank you for choosing Ames. That message is getting out via the Chamber and the AEDC, but not from the city and the City Council. That will change when I'm elected.

We need to have an honest-to-goodness team effort between the city staff, the AEDC, the Chamber, and the City Council. They have a cordial working relationship now but the communication between the entities and the attitude of the City Council could be improved. I have and will continue to sit down with business leaders in the community to find out what they need and how the city can help them. We won't be able to do it all, but I want existing businesses to know their input is sought and valued.

I'll bring fresh ideas and energy to support existing businesses. For example: Let's give local businesses a reduction on admission to the ISU career fairs so they can more easily find local talent and help graduating students who want to stay in Ames do so. Let's make it easier for local businesses to use the wonderful resources we have at our disposal from ISU and the ISU Research Park. Let's establish a mentoring program for local business owners and executives so they can learn from others' experiences and improve their chances for success.