

## **Election 2006 County Commission: Bailes proposes school fund plan**

**By Ian Berry Staff Writer**

Hamilton County Commission candidate John Bailes has proposed an "accountability agreement" between county and school officials that would link county spending to learning and facilities goals in schools.

Mr. Bailes, a Democrat who is challenging long-term incumbent Republican Curtis Adams in District 8, said the proposal is intended to end bickering among county commissioners and school district officials.

"It's a remedy for the destructive relationships that have been made in the past," Mr. Bailes said.

Mr. Adams said he always has supported accountability. He said many of the communication problems between the county and the school district will be solved when the school board hires a new superintendent.

"We're not supposed to be agreeing with everybody," Mr. Adams said. "Somebody's not thinking if everybody agrees."

Mr. Adams has called several times for Hamilton County Schools Superintendent Jesse Register's resignation during recent years. Dr. Register announced in September he would retire at the end of the school year, and Mr. Adams blasted an agreement to keep him as a consultant to the district for \$150,000 for the remaining year of his contract.

Hamilton County Board of Education member Debra Matthews said county commissioners have spoken a lot about accountability, but they never specify what they mean. She said accountability is used as a word "to put fear into the stakeholders."

"The current County Commission majority has beat that dead horse for a long time," Ms. Matthews said.

Last year, Mr. Adams was part of the four-member minority that voted against a 26-cent tax increase. In 2004, he and four other commissioners successfully rejected a tax increase.

Mr. Bailes said he would have approved last year's tax increase, but added he would have worked harder the previous three years to find other sources of funding.

Mr. Bailes said many of the details of an accountability agreement would have to be worked out. He suggested that the agreement could involve tying funding to SAT scores, stronger proficiency numbers or construction and facility goals. County and school district officials would have to agree on those goals, he said.

Ms. Matthews said she's wary of tying in school funding to test scores because "all kids don't test the same."

"In my opinion, you'd create more havoc," Ms. Matthews said.

Mr. Bailes pointed to "politically conservative" Moore County, N.C., as an example of where the idea has worked. Dr. Patrick Russo, the district's former superintendent, said the accountability agreement coincided with the district's jump in quality from the 47th district in the state to the seventh four years later.

Now superintendent of the Hampton, Va., city schools, Dr. Russo said the accountability agreement came under some fire once SAT scores rose, positioning schools for more funding. But he said the agreement set expectations for the schools that continue even now.

"We're in an era of accountability in education now," Dr. Russo said.

The program likely would require more funding overall to schools, Mr. Bailes said. He said he would seek such funding by advocating changes to the state's Basic Education Program funding formula, working to provide money from private and public grants, and business growth.

Mr. Adams said that in the past eight years the school district received \$81 million in grants and that county officials are already trying to convince the state to make changes to the BEP formula.

"We've all pushed for years," Mr. Adams said. "We have no control over what they do. We can ask them to change it."

He said, "It's good to see someone with new ideas," but added that the county already is doing its fair share for the schools.

Mr. Adams has represented the East Ridge area of District 8 since 1988. The lifelong Democrat switched parties last year, and local Democrats have said winning back the seat will be one of their priorities in 2006. Mr. Bailes is in the midst of a campaign to raise \$30,000 by the end of January.

Other candidates have until Feb. 16 to qualify for the race. The primary is May 2, and the general election is Aug. 3. E-mail Ian Berry at [iberry@timesfreepress.com](mailto:iberry@timesfreepress.com)

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