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Page 1: Introduction

**Q1** Please provide your name.

Ben McKee

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**Q2** Why are you running for State Legislature?

I am running for the Montana Legislature because for too long, the wellbeing of children in Montana has been an overlooked, peripheral issue. From my experience working in children's mental healthcare and the child welfare system, I know we can do better to protect and prioritize the safety and health of children in this state. Addressing these problems is more than just a moral issue, it is an economic issue. Our schools continue to struggle to keep up with growing needs with limited resources, and high numbers of young people lacking higher education limits our local economy to a workforce of service jobs. A lack of focus on the wellbeing of children has burdened Billings with the rising costs of crime, from law enforcement to insurance rates. The record number of children in local foster care continues to increase Medicaid costs, and the burdens of underfunding are passed to the community. Montana kids and families have been the focus of my career, and finding solutions to these issues is the heart of my campaign for office.

**Q3** What do you believe is the most important issue related to growing business in Billings and what are your suggestions for addressing that issue?

Our community must figure out how we going to produce the workforce that will replace the retiring population. Montana is on track to be one of the oldest states in the nation, and labor market projections predict that Billings will have 30,000 job openings in the next 10 years. Our local economy will need qualified workers to fill immediate and upcoming vacancies in a number of sectors of our workforce. This will require not only addressing the issues that affect our young people and their ability to achieve higher education, but also making Billings more attractive to professionals and families from out of state. Billings needs to invest in itself as a community, addressing poverty and crime while putting value in the amenities that lead to a higher quality of life. For example, if the legislature follows through on funding facility updates at MSU-Billings, we can expand our capacity for graduates entering the workforce. If we can find opportunities for more public-private partnerships to continue bringing greater options at the airport, this will encourage tourism and ultimately more incoming doctors, entrepreneurs, and young families moving to Billings. These are efforts that Yellowstone County legislators should be assisting in whenever possible. Billings needs to begin setting itself apart from its peer cities, because young professionals want to live in a community with a diverse economy, good public safety, and ample opportunities for recreation.

## Legislative Candidate Questionnaire

**Q4** In the 2017 Legislative Session, local option authority was supported by the Billings Chamber, City of Billings, Big Sky Economic Development, Downtown Billings Partnership, and numerous other organizations across the state. Under what conditions would you vote for a local option authority bill?

I fully support the passage of legislation that would grant local option authority. Opening this opportunity to communities in our state will allow Billings to implement solutions to meet our unique funding needs. In addition to supporting this legislation with my vote, I will work to build support within the community and be a part of the effort to educate voters on how this new tool for revenue would be used for infrastructure projects, public safety, and other measures which will make Billings a better place to live. Among the competing ideas for what local option should look like in legislation, I believe it is important that we give homeowners their fair share of the property tax relief, rather than having an unbalanced benefit going toward commercial property. Specifics aside, I am optimistic that we can get this passed on behalf of the people of Billings and communities around the state.

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**Q5** Tax Increment Finance (TIF) districts are an important economic development tool for our community. How will you work to ensure one of local government's most useful funding mechanisms is preserved?

I support the authority of Billings in establishing TIF districts, and generally oppose the idea of legislation that would restrict existing TIF laws. A number of assessments have concluded that these legislative changes would drastically limit financial flexibility in our East Billings Urban Renewal District, South Urban Renewal District, and Downtown District. These TIF districts have been very effective in creating environments conducive for future economic success, and the utilization of TIF is one of the few economic tools the city has for increasing our tax base while revitalizing blighted property. Similar to the local option issue, I will work to clarify misconceptions among my fellow legislators and Billings stakeholders, to better inform decision-makers on the mechanisms and economic benefits of TIF.

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**Q6** In 2016, Yellowstone County hoteliers remitted \$3.5 million in facility use taxes to the state. That year our regional Convention & Visitors Bureau, which markets and promotes our area as a travel destination, received \$350,000 (just 10%) from the state to market and promote tourism in our area. Will you work with the Billings Chamber and lodging partners to ensure more money is returned to the areas generating lodging tax revenue? (Y/N)

**Yes,**

You may provide additional context if appropriate.:

Yes, I believe there is a strong argument for the redistribution of revenues from the Lodge Facility Sales & Use Tax, a.k.a. bed tax, and returning a greater portion to the regional tourism offices. Effective tourism promotion means a stronger Billings economy; when people vacation in Billings, it benefits more than just our hotels, as full hotels mean full restaurants and retailers. While I have concerns about siphoning away monies from the state's General Fund and how this could exacerbate ongoing budget shortfalls, I do believe that allowing for greater local investment in tourism and giving revenue-generating communities like Billings their fair share of the proceeds will bring more visitors to our state and therefore more tax revenue over time. I look forward to working with our partners in the lodging industry and my fellow legislators to come up with a smart solution that works for Billings businesses.

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## Legislative Candidate Questionnaire

**Q7** MSU Billings is an essential economic driver for our community and surrounding area. Not only does MSU Billings provide educational opportunity for Montanans, it also assists with workforce development, an increasingly important challenge facing our community. How will you help to ensure MSU Billings receives adequate funding for facility updates?

It continues to be very disappointing to me that lawmakers were not willing to work together to pass the 2017 infrastructure bill, especially given that it would have appropriated \$5 million in funding to the new Yellowstone Science & Allied Health Building at MSU-Billings. This facility update is an important and necessary step in the university's future, and therefore our community's future as well. We know from labor market projections that Billings is going to need more qualified workers entering the workforce over the coming years, particularly in the healthcare industry, where our two hospitals currently employ hundreds of MSU-Billings graduates. In addition to providing a workforce to fill healthcare and other white collar jobs in the community, MSU-Billings and City College are uniquely positioned to offer opportunities for training in the trade industry, which is another important sector of our local economy. The university is one of our community's crown jewels, and legislators from Yellowstone County need to be bold advocates for its comprehensive funding.

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**Q8** The Billings Chamber, City of Billings, Big Sky Economic Development, Downtown Billings Partnership, and other community partners, are working with Hammes Co. on the development of One Big Sky Center, comprised of two development districts and anchored by a regional convention center. If a state funding source were identified and developed, under what conditions would you support the inclusion of state monies in the funding mix for a regional convention center in Billings?

One Big Sky Center has the potential to be the largest development project in the history of Montana. While the details continue to be refined at this time, it's clear to me that this multi-use complex in downtown Billings would bring an important stimulus for economic growth both locally and throughout the state. I am proud to support the possibility of a world-class convention center, business park, and shopping corridor in the heart of Billings. The ongoing planning of lifestyle, medical, and educational districts will be important in shaping the community's exciting future. As a legislator representing this community, I believe it will be my duty to bring funding home to make this project a reality. Once there is a proposal put forth by Billings leaders for state funding, I will work with the city to build support for the measures that are needed.

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## Legislative Candidate Questionnaire

**Q9** Sixteen percent of Billings workers are employed in the healthcare arena resulting in a total direct and indirect economic output of \$2.6 billion annually. Do you believe that cutting state reimbursement to hospitals, clinics and other healthcare providers is a way to address state budget shortfalls? (Y, N)

**No,**

You may provide additional context if appropriate.:

As someone who has spent his career in the nonprofit sector serving children and families in Billings, I absolutely understand the dire consequences of targeting state reimbursement rates for cuts. It is not only lazy governance, it is economic malpractice. Cutting Medicaid reimbursement rates and shrinking these services ultimately shifts the burden onto communities to compensate for the difference, including healthcare providers, nonprofit organizations, and businesses. Not surprisingly, we are already seeing the devastating effects of the 2017 cuts, with the Center for Children and Families ceasing operations due in large part to the reimbursement rate cuts. Not only has this created a vacuum of needed services in our community, but jobs were lost in the closure. We will continue to see more of these outcomes without lawmakers who understand the consequences of these irresponsible policy decisions. As a legislator, I will bring an important perspective to this issue, and will ensure that we work harder in the state government to find creative and appropriate avenues to address budgetary hurdles.

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**Q10** Throughout the legislative interim and November 2017 Special Session the re-evaluation of Montana's funding mechanisms was a topic of discussion. What are your thoughts on the need to identify new revenue sources to address a shifting economy and our infrastructure needs?

It is imperative that the legislature addresses the lack of diversity in funding mechanisms and find solutions to the issues we face today and the challenges of the coming decades. There is no doubt that the legislature needs to pass an infrastructure bill and determine funding sources to be dedicated to construction and repair of Montana's roads, bridges, and schools. Montana's infrastructure, earning a grade of C- by the American Society of Civil Engineers, is in need of billions of dollars in investment. This investment will save money for the state and taxpayers in the long run, and is an essential piece in Montana's economic future. Passage of local option authority in the legislature and subsequent voter approval will also open the door to funding new infrastructure projects in Yellowstone County. Additionally, a number of revenue sources were left on the table in the 2017 legislative sessions, such as the bipartisan-supported tax on tobacco products. It is evident that lawmakers need to work together and get creative to explore funding mechanisms and address Montana's needs.

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## Legislative Candidate Questionnaire

**Q11** Billings, and the greater Yellowstone County area, has the largest legislative delegation in the state and there is great potential to work together toward regional specific initiatives. How do you plan to work with all members of the Yellowstone County area delegation for the betterment of our business community during the 2019 Legislative Session?

I'm proud of our state for its approach to a clean, effective political system. Montana's strict campaign finance laws set the example for the nation in keeping money out of politics. We also have a structure to our elections and legislative sessions that seeks to foster a "citizen legislature," one that is truly representative of its constituents. These are great things about our state, and because we have this model as a starting point, there is no excuse for hyperpartisanship and a lack of willingness to work together. With biannual legislative sessions lasting just 90 days, there is no time to waste, and as a legislator I will work hard to be effective in a cooperative lawmaking process. Regardless of party affiliation, I believe every person elected to serve in the 2019 session from Yellowstone County will be going to Helena wanting to serve their community well. With this common ground, we must use this opportunity to work together and fight for Billings businesses, hospitals, nonprofits, and our regional initiatives.

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### Page 3: Finalizing Questionnaire

**Q12** If you have not sent the Billings Chamber a high-res image you would like us to use, please upload a photo here.

**Ben McKee 4x5@300 Color.jpg (1.4MB)**

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