



# Dean of Public Affairs

BY DREW RUBLE

## A Q & A with Nashville's new Mayor

On Sept. 11, the voters of Nashville-Davidson County elected former Metro-Davidson County public defender and ex-Metro law director Karl Dean to be the city/county's next mayor. As *BusinessTN's* Nashville municipal spotlight coverage for 2007, editor Drew Ruble sat down with Dean to discuss his vision for the city and issues pertaining to Middle Tennessee's business climate.

**Q** Your predecessor, Bill Purcell, for whom you worked as Metro legal director, recently stated he was unaware until after a firm decision had been made that Verizon Wireless was planning a new \$54 million regional headquarters in Franklin (siphoning off 550 Nashville jobs in the process). What is your view of regional cooperation versus competing for jobs and investment within the city limits?

**DEAN** We're at a point now where things like the environment, transportation, economic development, even tourism, need to be looked at from a regional perspective. And the mayor of Nashville is the natural person to lead those efforts. With tourism, if visitors are coming to Middle Tennessee to attend the Walking Horse celebration, the chances are they are going to come to Nashville, also. In Middle Tennessee each June, you have two of the most important and largest music festivals in the country going on within weeks of each other. Working together with surrounding counties and promoting Middle Tennessee as a tourism destination would be a big plus. Economic development is a more difficult issue. Clearly, we want to protect our tax base and enhance it. As far as the Verizon thing, I don't know whether that's an anomaly or what. It's obviously something to be concerned about because we've got to keep our tax base here to do the things I want to do in terms of improving schools and public safety. But progress in a surrounding county is not necessarily a bad thing for us. If the counties around us continue to grow, it's will enhance our viability as the core of this region and enhance our downtown. Also, keep in

mind—of the jobs that have been created by business relocation and expansion in the last four years, 45% are in Davidson County and 55% are scattered amongst the other nine counties making up the Middle Tennessee region. So we've gotten the lion's share of the jobs.

**Q** What, if any, relationships do you have with your peer group in other urban Tennessee counties, and what plans do you have to work in concert with them on issues? And what issues?

**DEAN** I know the big four cities have worked together in terms of how they address issues that confront them as larger urban areas. Education is one. Roads another. So they have a common interest and present a united front to the legislature, which is a good thing. After I won, I got a very nice phone call from [Bill Haslem,] the mayor of Knoxville. A C Wharton Jr., the mayor of Shelby County, was the public defender in Memphis when I was the public defender in Nashville, so we go back to the 1990s.

**Q** Tell me about your current relationship with Gov. Phil Bredesen, who was mayor of Nashville at a time when you served as Nashville's public defender. What two or three items relating to Nashville and your tenure will you be putting on the table for him when you meet?

**DEAN** When he came into office as Nashville mayor, I was already public defender, but I enjoyed working with him. I thought his management style in terms of letting independent elected officials run their offices

PHOTOS BY ERIC ENGLAND

was good. If we were doing well, he didn't interfere. As for issues, transportation is critical. We're at a point where traffic affects people's lives enough that they want to see something done about it. Obviously, Education is also an issue. The governor did a great job last year of getting additional resources to Davidson County, which I would encourage him to continue to do so. With education such a big part of what I want to do as mayor, he is definitely the right governor to have.

**Q** Under your predecessor's leadership, a proposed new downtown minor league baseball stadium proposal failed. Some blamed a lack of public commitment for that failure. The previous administration also complained about the cost to taxpayers of maintaining operations at the downtown Sommet Center, home of the Nashville Predators. Now we have a new team ownership group clamoring for even more of a city subsidy. Talk to me about what your tenure as mayor as it relates to our professional sporting assets in town and also how much you think your prior involvement as chief legal counsel for Nashville will help or hinder you in dealing with those issues.

**DEAN** Having been the legal director is a help. My familiarity with the Titans deal and the Predators deal is much more than the average person. I worked on those fairly in-depth. I was involved with and understand the Sounds deal. I'm very interested in keeping baseball in Nashville. A downtown baseball stadium, wherever it was located downtown, would be a good thing for the city. I thought the city made the Sounds a good offer, [but] when it came down to who was going to be able to sign the documents saying, "we can fulfill these obligations," the Sounds were not in a position to do that. So for me to go down that road again, I would need to know up front that they are going to be in a position to meet their commitments. The same with the Predators. I'm a multiple-year season ticket holder. They mean a lot to the viability of Lower Broadway and downtown at night. That being said, whatever we do there has to balance taxpayers' interests with the positive impact of the sports team on the city.

**Q** Many believe it is a mistake to build the proposed \$450 million publicly owned downtown convention center when the city already has a world-class privately funded center just up the road in the Gaylord Opryland hotel and conference center. Others have argued that the city should instead focus on improving service and quality at the center we already have. Are naysayers missing the point here?

**DEAN** A convention center is an investment in the city. Periodically, a city needs to reinvest in its downtown to keep it viable. This is what we need to be doing now. If we build it, we're going to go from competing for about 20% of the business to 70% that our convention center currently is just not big enough to compete for. We'll create thousands of jobs, and additional sales tax revenues. Nashville has this brand—Music City—and if you build that brand into the convention center, it's going to have a lot of appeal. Our central location, being within driving distance of much of the country, good air serv-

ice through Southwest Airlines—we're a very attractive city for a convention. If you look at who we are going to be competing with for downtown conventions—Indianapolis, Charlotte, St. Louis, Minneapolis, Dallas—I'm clearly biased, but I think people are going to choose Nashville. The Gaylord project with the downtown project together should be a home run for the city.

**Q** What is your commitment to Music Row and to using the power of your bully pulpit to influence policies—many of them legal in nature—facing songwriters, record companies, publishing houses and other entertainment industries?

**DEAN** They have some unique challenges because of illegal downloading and copyright violations at the international level. Obviously Congressman [Jim] Cooper and our two U.S. Senators are in a better position to help them. But anything I can do I certainly will. The city has done a better job of reaching out to the music community. And the music industry has done better at being cooperative. We can continue to build on that. We're fortunate. There are only a handful of cities in America that have real identities, and we're one.

**Q** You say you want to lower the drop-out rate in schools. You have considerable control of the school system's purse strings. What is your view of charter school programs, or more broadly speaking, the effort to inject some pro-market capitalistic principles into government schools?

**DEAN** When you have a school that has a 50% dropout rate, and has that dropout rate year after year, the status quo is not your friend and we need to do something different. I would be very open to the possibility of charter schools where we are not succeeding to get something going. The city ought to be regarded as a city that is not afraid to innovate. I would welcome some change where it is needed. But we also need to remember we have great successes in our school system. You can't ignore that Hume-Fogg and MLK are among the top 50 high schools in America. It's an incredible achievement.

**Q** You've said Metro needs to be friendlier to entrepreneurs. Is that a perceived weakness of the city in your eyes? Have we focused too much on major corporate relocation and recruitment and not enough on homegrown talent?

**DEAN** We've got to make sure the businesses that came here on their own or formed here on their own without any help from the government or incentives feel we appreciate them. And that the mayor's office is open to them if they've got problems or want to talk. I want them to do that before they decide life is rosier north or south on I-65. I heard a lot on the campaign trail about the permit process and other government regulation that it is time-consuming and could be handled in a much more effective and friendlier way. If we could do one-stop shopping—make it easier for businesses to start here—that would be a good thing. Those folks are the backbone of the economy; they love the city, and we should be doing what we can to make life easier for them.

**Q** You were involved in the Metro lawsuit with Harding Academy private school in Nashville over that school's plan to demolish some homes they owned in a Nashville neighborhood adjacent to school property. Many in the business community saw Metro's use of "historic" status to halt demolition as an example of government overstepping its reach in regard to private property rights. What is your hindsight-aided view of that legal tangle?

**DEAN** Well, I was doing my job. That's what I'd say. I think it would be better if I'm in that situation as mayor to do everything I could to get the parties together to resolve it. No one knows better than lawyers that nobody benefits from lengthy litigation. I believe in historic preservation, but it's also important that people know the rules at the front end and the rules do not change midstream.

**Q** Final thoughts?

**DEAN** Public safety always has to be a priority for a mayor. Because once people perceive that a city has safety problems, it really hurts you in so many fundamental ways.

Right now, we are a hot city. Part of it is because we have a reputation for being a safe city. I will do whatever I can to preserve that. **tn**




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