

## 2024 AAVSO Board Candidate Questionnaire

### **James Bruce McMath**

#### **How many years have you been a member of the AAVSO?**

15.

#### **Why do you want to serve on the AAVSO Board of Directors?**

Not surprisingly, the board appears to be dominated by accomplished astronomy professionals and amateurs who are at the pinnacle of the amateur astronomy community. However, at its base is the AAVSO's constituency, and perhaps more importantly, its potential constituency are people like me, citizen science astronomers working at the edge of their native abilities. I was not educated as a scientist and doing what I do in astronomy is an adventure in personal development. That perspective and my experience working in other non-profit volunteer driven organizations, may allow me to make a unique contribution, especially relative to efforts to expand the participation base.

#### **What are your current and past contributions to AAVSO?**

After tracing Monsieur Messier's catalog many times and being aware of the role amateurs have played in astronomy over time and variable stars in particular, I aspired to try my hand at making a modest contribution myself. I joined the AAVSO and made visual observations over several years. Back then, you got your charts and turned in your observations by mail. This led to an absurdly ambitious plan - given the technology of the day (and my limited time and skills) - to implement a photographic nova patrol. Professional life and reality intervened.

Nearing retirement, I committed to picking up where I left off. I rejoined the AAVSO in 2012, mentored under Tim Crawford, completed several AAVSO Choice Courses, and started a project to monitor young stellar objects with a robotic CCD system. I have since logged over a hundred thousand observations, discovered an eclipsing binary (TYC 3670-588-1) and an UXOR (BD+11 820), and documented the need to reclassify a few more variables (DU Cep, V0353 Lac, V0771 Cyg, V1912 Cyg). I have also contributed data to a few professional projects and done a tour of duty on the Data Validation Team, helping to clear a large backlog of datasets needing review.

#### **In your opinion, what are the greatest strengths of AAVSO?**

Its essential nature and history is its strength. Astronomy is the mother science, and much of its evolution is uniquely marked by the contributions of amateurs. Even many pioneering professionals started their contributions as amateurs. In no area of the science has this been truer than in the study of variable stars. The AAVSO was created to facilitate the contribution of amateurs at a time when the science was becoming professionally dominant. As such, it is the guardian and trustee of the amateur legacy in astronomy and the mothership of citizen science. Inspiring and empowering amateur astronomers to become part of this tradition is

both its stock-in-trade and its mission. This unique legacy is AAVSO's principal strength and asset.

**If elected to the Board, how would you help AAVSO translate those strengths into opportunities?**

The AAVSO has mastered the onboarding and empowerment of variable star observers. However, an extensive reservoir of potential amateur talent remains unaware of how accessible and meaningful variable star observing can be. This is a marketing challenge, and marketing is about knowing your potential customers.

I would bring to the board the perspective of one who comes from the base of the amateur community pyramid, the guy or gal who might be inspired to take up the challenge of becoming a variable star observer and citizen scientist if exposed to the value and feasibility of doing so. To grow AAVSO's base and increase inclusion and thus its general influence, those are the people that need to be reached.

**In your opinion, what are the greatest weaknesses of AAVSO?**

Astronomy, as a science, can seem so intimidating, so distant intellectually to most people. This is even true for many amateur astronomers. They don't realize that if they can record an observation of M13, they can make a meaningful observation of a Long Period variable. If they can take an astronomical image, they can do photometry. As alluded to above, the AAVSO has mastered the onboarding of new observers, but more can be done to inspire people to realize variable star observing is something they can do that has scientific value and make them part of the most prestigious citizen science program ever.

**If elected to the Board, how would you help the AAVSO effectively meet those challenges?**

It is a matter of bring another perspective to the table that might have synergistic value.

**Strategic Planning [Development of vision and mission statements]**

Moderate Experience

**Strategic Planning [Creation of a strategic plan]**

Moderate Experience

**Strategic Planning [Identification and ranking of priorities]**

Moderate Experience

**Strategic Planning [Development of plans to achieve objectives]**

Moderate Experience

**Please describe one of your greatest accomplishments in strategic planning.**

What I have been able to do with the Arkansas Natural Sky Association. I took over the chair of the fledgling Arkansas IDA chapter in 2017. Its sole public face was a Facebook Group

page with a few dozen followers. Today, that same page has nearly eight thousand followers. I worked with the National Park Service to get the Buffalo National River designated a Dark-Sky Park in 2019. More recently, I have been helping the State Parks Department develop a master light-scape management plan for the state's parks, which it is hoped will soon lead to several Dark-Sky parks. In 2021, I chaired the first Arkansas Dark-Sky Festival in which 20 civic, astronomy, and environmental organizations participated. We will hold our third event this year. I helped institute an ANSA-managed library Telescope program that has placed scopes in 25 rural Arkansas counties.

**Governance and Oversight [Policy development]**

Moderate Experience

**Governance and Oversight [Financial oversight]**

Advanced Experience

**Governance and Oversight [Resource development]**

Moderate Experience

**Governance and Oversight [Program Evaluation]**

Moderate Experience

**Please describe one of your greatest accomplishments in governance and oversight.**

I was managing partner in a law firm of note for several decades. As noted above, I have chaired the Arkansas Natural Sky Association since 2017, making it one of the more accomplished IDA affiliate/chapters. I have been the CEO of the Arkansas Trial Lawyer's Association, the state Sierra Club chapter, and my local astronomy club, and served on the board of several non-profits.

**Advocacy and Public Relations [Community engagement]**

Advanced Experience

**Advocacy and Public Relations [Campaigns and initiatives]**

Moderate Experience

**Advocacy and Public Relations [Spokesperson Role]**

Advanced Experience

**Advocacy and Public Relations [Event Promotion]**

Advanced Experience

**Advocacy and Public Relations [Social Media]**

Moderate Experience

**Advocacy and Public Relations [Storytelling]**

Moderate Experience

**Advocacy and Public Relations [Media Relations]**

Basic Experience

**Advocacy and Public Relations [Brand Ambassadorship]**

Advanced Experience

**Please describe one of your greatest successes in advocacy or public relations.**

Promoting the concept of dark-skies as an environmental issue. This is not an easy task, believe me, but we have made progress.

**Fundraising [Managing fundraising efforts]**

Moderate Experience

**Fundraising [Annual fundraising campaigns]**

Basic Experience

**Fundraising [Special capital campaigns]**

No Experience

**Fundraising [Soliciting sponsors for events, programs, or activities]**

Moderate Experience

**Fundraising [Cultivating donors]**

Basic Experience

**Fundraising [Securing grants]**

Basic Experience. However, in my experience, the AAVSO does not pursue that kind of fundraising. I have limited personal experience with grant funding.

**Fundraising [Building partnerships]**

Moderate Experience

**Please describe one of your greatest fundraising accomplishments.**

I hate fund raising. Who does not, of course? I have been involved in doing it many times over the years for political and nonprofit purposes. It is not something I am good at. I realize that is frequently the job, or at least a major part of being on the board of many organizations. If soliciting donations from individuals is important aspect of the AAVSO board, I should find another way to become involved, to be honest.