

Cheryl Munson, Democratic Candidate for Monroe County Council
Responses to questions from the Greater Bloomington Chamber of Commerce
For the June 2, 2020 Primary Election

1. Monroe County government will be significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. What are your top concerns for county government in that regard, and how do you propose to address those concerns?

Monroe County government has been affected by the Covid-19 health emergency since the initial warnings. Our Health and Emergency Management Departments and elected officials took steps to obtain key information and develop plans for the county's response. The top concerns for county government have been and will continue to be to protect our employees and people in our care, and to help our residents through this emergency. For this reason, the County Commissioners ordered an emergency declaration, closed most county buildings, and implemented work-from-home requirements so that county government would continue to remain "open" even if buildings were not. The Sheriff and Jail Commander instituted procedures in the jail to limit exposure of staff and inmates.

My initial top concerns are the ones that remain a priority: Many of our residents need access to food, medicines, and the diverse assistance provided by our many service and non-profit organizations. And down the line, our agencies and organizations need additional resources to meet the unprecedented demand for their services. County government immediately stepped up to approve funding to help the two key agencies providing care for our residents: (1) The United Way, which supports many member organizations, to help them provide services, and (2) the Hoosier Hills Food Bank which provides food to many pantries and service organizations. Both agencies continue to appeal for financial help. The Council immediately took action to provide bridge funding for the county's assistance from the Sophia Travis Community Services Grants Fund. That fund will be replenished by other appropriations, as it too will be providing funding later this year. Additionally, the Commissioners and the Council have worked together to make available \$500,000 in funding from the county's Rainy Day Fund for response to COVID-19 emergencies, and requests for assistance are being approved this week.

Last but not least, the Commissioners and Council have directed \$200,000 in Food & Beverage Tax revenue for a relief fund to assist the tourism-related businesses in the county – primarily restaurants – which had to close as a result of the COVID-19 emergency. The relief fund is designed to help these establishments survive to re-open when the emergency subsides and to support their non-working employees which will

be important to the success of their reopening. The tax revenue was collected by the businesses, so directing it to help them is not only consistent with the statutory use of the funds but seems inherently fitting.

Further help for community service organizations whose resources are over-tapped will come later this year from the county's Sophia Travis Community Services Grants Program. I have been involved with this grant program for 10 years, since before I was elected to the Council. Funding has previously been awarded for food, nutrition, security, health, and shelter, as well as arts, climate change, youth enrichment and other needs. This year, I expect more grant applications to request support for projects involving the basics of food, health, and shelter.

Additional funding will be needed to support the expanded services of the Health and Emergency Management Departments and the changes in our upcoming elections. Meeting these funding needs will probably require tapping uncommitted General Funds for the departments and moneys in our Election Fund that are slated for future years.

2. The council is responsible for appropriating county funds. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, what will be your funding priorities for the county? What projects or departmental budgets, if any, do you expect will see funding cuts?

The Council appropriates county funds during the annual budget process for the upcoming year, and subsequently throughout the year as needs arise. Appropriations are dependent on revenues (from property taxes, income taxes, grants (federal, state, non-governmental), special purpose income taxes, state distributions from gas and other taxes, and fees).

County budgets should reflect community priorities, which are translated into action during the budget process by Council members and their decisions. Among the departments providing statutorily required services – e.g., Auditor, Treasurer, Recorder, Sheriff, Jail, etc. -- and those that are important but not required, e.g., Planning, Parks and Recreation, my funding priorities will probably shift toward new or expanded needs from the departments most specifically involved with public safety. These are the Departments of Health and Emergency Management, as reflected in their missions, and the County Jail, which houses and staffs many people whose health and safety the county is responsible for. The reason for prioritizing the needs of these departments now, and for 2021, is my belief that the COVID-19 response will not be over by the end of this year.

Years of prudent financial management by the Council have led the county to a tradition of balanced budgets and an investment in reserves that have provided secure

funding for elections and a healthy balance in our Rainy Day Fund. Monroe County's fiscal health is the envy of many counties. But given the likely magnitude of decreased revenues for 2021 and beyond, our reserves will not be sufficient to carry our budget needs forward.

I anticipate the Council will take immediate action to emplace a temporary hiring freeze for full- and part-time workers, which can be extended as needed and provide exceptions for public safety needs. For the 2021 budget work ahead of us, I am not interested in specifying which particular departments should have budget cuts, because I feel strongly that department heads are the most knowledgeable people to propose how their budgets can best be trimmed and to relay to the Council and the public what the county will lose by specific cuts. In fact, the County Council has already requested information from all of its departments regarding the impacts of the current emergency. This information and communication about future needs will form the basis for our prudent decision making in the months to come. Hard decisions will be made by both our departments and the Council.

3. Other than the current crisis, what will be your top 3 priorities on the county council?

My top three priorities are unchanged from January and pre-crisis times. But in some ways, the crisis expands their importance.

(1) Improve our criminal justice and mental health systems. The county has invested in a study of these systems to reduce the time needed for case processing through the courts, to reduce the rate of recidivism in our jail population, and to expand mental health services for people, both prior to and after their connection with the criminal justice system. A revamped program of judicial and mental health care can also reduce the jail population and with expanded inmate services and programs will foster rehabilitation rather than retribution. With reduced family visitation as well as fewer education and counseling services in our Jail, our inmates are currently receiving less rehabilitation due to the health emergency.

(2) Increase affordable housing. In my view, this includes a wide range of housing types, from new multi-family apartments and condos/townhomes to single-family houses built to serve the demand for "starter homes," and modest constructions with smaller footprints that are grouped in greater density in subdivisions and among other housing types. All these housing options can be considered "workforce" housing and can truly fit that need if developments take place close to places of employment or to major transportation routes, where public transportation is, or is more likely to be, offered.

The county can aid the expansion of affordable housing by providing suitable land, which is not needed for other purposes, and by developing the kind of zoning regulations that encourage right-sized constructions and density in the right kind of locations. Reduced permit costs, and priority for planning review, are ways that the county can incentivize new housing developments in the preferred areas. Affordable housing is more likely to be developed in the county's jurisdiction – outside the city limits – because of the availability and cost of suitable lands. I think affordable housing will be an increasing need as our economy opens and employment catches up to pre-crisis levels.

(3) Enhance the protection of Lake Monroe's watershed. There are multiple problems in the Lake Monroe watershed that contribute to lower water quality and summer algal blooms. Degraded conditions deter swimmers and affect recreation which contributes significantly (\$7.8 million in labor income, annually) to the county's economy. Improved water quality can be obtained through management and education. Management goals and priorities will be identified through an ongoing study funded by the EPA and the Indiana Department of Environmental Management, which has wide regional support from the three main counties included in the watershed.

I serve on the Steering Committee for the Lake Monroe watershed study and am already looking toward the next step. Once the management plan is completed at the end of the grant project, we need to employ a watershed manager. Investing in a Watershed Manager is an important long-term investment for the future of our county. The approximately 140,000 people who get their drinking water from Lake Monroe are the primary reason to protect the water-quality of the lake from further degradation.

Education will be a major component of the management plan, as residents and visitors will be more protective if they realize that there is actually no other location in Monroe County where a "new" reservoir could be built for our drinking water and other uses. The county's geology and extent of development are not just limiting factors for another lake, but prohibitive ones. We cannot let Lake Monroe fail in the ways that led to deterioration of the county's earlier water-supply lakes.