

**Julie Thomas, Democratic Candidate for Monroe County Commission District 2
Responses to questions from the Greater Bloomington Chamber of Commerce
For the Nov. 3, 2020 General Election**

1. Monroe County has taken a leadership role during the COVID-19 pandemic. What are your top priorities for county government as our community balances public health concerns with economic recovery?

The Board of Commissioners has worked actively with the community, community organizations and county departments to protect the health of residents. The Commissioners and Council worked together to provide a Township Assistance fund to help our residents avoid evictions or utility disconnections. We have funded local food banks and the United Way as well. I have spent some of my scant free time to work at the Hoosier Hills Food Bank with the National Guard, staff, and volunteers to provide food for hundreds of households. The need is great. On the heels of protecting the health of area residents is the effort to ensure our businesses and social service organizations remain viable and vital.

It has been an incredibly difficult time for our local business community. We have dedicated nearly \$400,000 of Food & Beverage tax funds to provide grants (rather than loans) to businesses and social service agencies. We are now providing CARES funding for these same entities (see the form at co.monroe.in.us). This support has helped keep businesses open and people employed.

It is clear that the more careful we are – wearing a face covering, washing our hands, and practicing social distancing – the more likely it is that we will emerge from the pandemic with an even stronger community and a more vibrant economy.

2. As Monroe County revamps its zoning regulations, how should county government balance its rural and urban character? What principles guide your approach to the county development ordinance (CDO)?

The Plan Commission focused on public engagement through the process of creating the Rural and Urbanizing plans. These plans established the principles for the development of County Development Ordinance. As with many projects, the pandemic has impacted our progress, but there is forward momentum.

Rural portions of the county do not have the infrastructure to support dense housing or industrial development. The urbanizing portion of the county, surrounding the City of Bloomington, does have greater infrastructure. However, this does not mean that it is sufficient to meet the needs of city-style development. I adhere to the principle that urban areas should remain urban, and rural areas should remain rural. One of the most important things we can provide for our residents and business owners is a clearly written and easy-to-follow code. This is a priority. Monroe County has amazing natural resources that we must protect - including Lake Monroe, our drinking water supply. These resource make our county such a special place to live and work.

3. What is your position on the expansion of the Monroe County Convention Center and the continuation of the Food & Beverage Tax?

We spent months working with the County Council, City Council and the Mayor to develop a project that will serve the community well and in an equitable manner. While initial negotiations occurred between the Mayor and the Commissioners, we recognized the vital role of the County Council and City Council in shaping the project. The incorporation of the Councils brought a range of ideas and transparency to the process. The community deserves and expects both.

Given the impact of COVID-19 on our local business community and on the convention industry (as a whole), it is time to reassess the viability of the Convention Center expansion project. The Food & Beverage tax revenues have been, and can be, utilized for economic development / tourism projects. We utilized the fund to provide grants (rather than loans) for local businesses and social service organizations in the community. In the future, the fund may help us ensure payments on the current Convention Center's debt are made (as innkeepers' tax revenues have declined during the pandemic). However, it is up to the Council to make the decision about the Food & Beverage tax.

4. The job of county commissioner is considered to be part-time, with a salary of about \$35,000. What changes, if any, would you advocate for regarding the position's time commitments and salary?

The Board of County Commissioners serves as the executive of county government (and we are also the legislative branch!). Our responsibilities are immense. As residents witnessed during the pandemic, we are responsive and compassionate community leaders. In many instances, I worked more than 80 hours a week to contend with the impact of COVID-19. While both staff and elected officials in county government have

made amazing contributions throughout this crisis, the Commissioners have a unique and important role to play.

In addition to our regular legislative, executive and administrative work (all of which is substantial), the Commissioners continue to pursue a range of projects to benefit county residents – including the implementation of the recommendations of the Criminal Justice Study and the Quarry in the Uplands economic development project. All of this requires our time and attention. The residents of Monroe County expect us to work full-time and to be responsive to emergency situations as needed. So, the question stands before the County Council: how will you ensure that we are paid as full-time workers?