

Penny Githens, Democratic Candidate for Monroe County Commission District 3
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?**

Maintaining the economic vitality of Monroe County while simultaneously ensuring the health and well-being of our residents is my top priority as we go into 2021. Monroe County Government took the lead in shutting down our offices, even before the Governor issued a stay-at-home order, working to ensure the health of our employees. Even though our offices were physically closed, we have continued to serve the public. We have provided almost \$400,000 in grant money to local small businesses and organizations to keep them afloat, we have collaborated with local businesses on our face-covering mandate, and set-up a program to allow local entities to apply for reimbursement for COVID-related expenses through the CARES Act. We have made approximately \$100,000 in rainy-day funds available to local food banks and non-profits to ensure and another \$100,000 to the Township Assistance funds to help residents avoid utility shut-offs and evictions.

Part of the reason Monroe County has done so well during the pandemic is our collaboration with the Health Department, Emergency Management, Indiana University, IU Health, the City of Bloomington, and others to ensure the well-being of our community. We will continue these efforts to assist local businesses and residents.

- 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)?**

We are seeking to balance the rural portions of our county with the demands of a growing population. Three priorities for me are looking at ways to increase work-force housing through our zoning efforts, addressing karsts features, and drainage/storm water issues. Additionally, we intend to reduce the number of zones and make them more understandable.

The Monroe County Commissioners have already taken one step to address the cost of new homes by allowing developers in specific PUDs to build two conjoined units with a zero-lot line. We had done this on a case-by-case basis in the past, but recently updated our zoning ordinance to make this process less costly.

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

If the county had not had access to funds built up through the Food and Beverage Tax, we would not have been able to provide grants to businesses and non-profits during the COVID pandemic. In a very real sense we are using money collected through this tax to keep tourism-related entities afloat, ready to again do business once the pandemic ends. I hope county residents will support the collection of this tax in the short-term, knowing that the entities that survive will be

providing additional tourism dollars back into our local economy. Ultimately, though, the decision to maintain or repeal the Food and Beverage Tax lies in the hands of the Monroe County Council.

But COVID has brought about other changes in the way people do business. Many of us have learned that groups can connect virtually, reducing the need for large Conventions. If that mindset continues, we need to seriously reconsider the financial wisdom of expanding our convention center. It is very conceivable that business income to the convention center may not make expansion feasible and revenue from the Inn Keepers' tax, which supports our current convention center, may be insufficient for continued operation.

- 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?**

I was retired when I was recruited to run for Monroe County Commissioner. It was my understanding that being a Commissioner is a part-time job, so I ran thinking I would be paid to work part-time. While the framers of the Indiana Constitution envisioned this as a part-time job, which it might have been 200 years ago, being a County Commissioner is currently a full-time job that requires an immense amount of flexibility in one's schedule. This is a matter of pay equity because the Commissioners work as much as other elected officials. Several other counties, like Vigo and Lafayette, already pay their Commissioners in line with other elected officials.

On another note, I worry about who will seek this job in the future. Do the citizens of Monroe County want to continue to see a retired white woman in this position or do they want to potentially see someone who brings more diversity to the position, like a talented single parent who can only do this job if they earn a living wage? I would argue that we want the best people making decisions for us and leading us into the future, and that requires a better salary.

The discussion about increasing the Commissioners' salary isn't new, it's been going on for many years. Each year it gets kicked down the road for one reason or another. It's time to stop kicking this issue down the road and ensure Monroe County has the leadership it deserves.