



2020 Hawai'i Island Candidate Questionnaire

Candidate Name: Bethany Morrison



Candidate Race: Hawai'i County Council – District 1

Candidate Website: www.votebethanymorrison.com

1. In 2018, the Hawaii County Council passed Bill 108 (now Ordinance 2018-114), which regulates un-hosted short-term vacation rentals (STVRs) in Hawaii County. What policies would you implement to further regulate or deregulate short-term vacation rentals on Hawaii Island, whether hosted or un-hosted, and what will be the economic impact(s) of those policies?

First, given the economic impacts from COVID 19, we need to think critically about further regulations that would impact the economic vitality of our residents and develop our strategy to diversifying the economy before we implement any additional regulations. However, I see opportunity to clarify the definitions of hosted, un-hosted and bed and breakfast. As a County planner, I realize the value in clear and transparent definitions and processes. Once the definitions are clarified, I would propose treating hosted vacation rentals the same as bed and breakfast establishments. Then I would look to our General Plan to define places or criteria for resort type uses, or visitor destinations, including the un-hosted short term vacation rentals.

2. In 2019, the Real Property Tax Office implemented policies to assess properties at their “highest and best use”. This changed the real property tax classifications for many residents, mainly those on agricultural-zoned parcels smaller than one-acre in size, increasing their real property tax bill. What are your thoughts on the County real property tax and how revenue may be increased without negative impacts for residents?

I believe that the tax structure needs to assess the values based on the use that is actually occurring on the property. In many cases a 1 acre Agriculturally zoned lot is being used for residential use and should be taxed accordingly. The agriculture exemption needs to be clarified to be applied equitably and to close the loop that has allowed for misuse of that exemption. At the same time we need to look at incentives within the tax structure that encourage affordable rental units and “productive” agriculture. In addition, we need to look at removing barriers of our building and zoning codes for these uses.

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3. Hawai'i County residents generate over 200,000 tons of solid waste each year. In 2019, the County closed the Hilo landfill and is now hauling solid waste across the island to a landfill in Pu'uana'hulu. Additionally, due to significant decreases in the global market for recyclables, the County of Hawai'i is no longer accepting some of the types of materials collected at the County recycling & transfer stations. What solutions would you propose to resolve the County's solid waste dilemma?

We need to look at island scale solutions for repurposing our waste. I am not opposed to waste to energy, but would also want us to really look at supporting and prioritizing a circular economy as part of our economic diversification strategy. There are ways to reuse our waste that produce local jobs and protect our environment while reducing the amount of waste that needs to be disposed of.

4. Median home prices in Hawaii County continue to rise with shrinking inventory and increasing demand. Since 2011, the median sales price for a residential home in Hawaii County has increased, year to year, by as little as 0.38% (2015-2016) up to 13.46% (2012-2013) per year. What are your top three (3) actionable items to address housing affordability?

First, I would incentive the tax structure and remove barriers for additional dwelling units. Second, I would prioritize investments in infrastructure in our urban centers to be able to increase the density and overall amount on housing units in our towns that have access to jobs ad services. Third, I would request inventories of our housing stock at each district level. We could then use that information to inform updates to our housing code's affordable housing requirements and credit structure.

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5. The Hawai'i state legislature recently proposed legislation that would put the responsibility on the counties to research and provide data on topics such as energy, coastal zone/sea level rise, etc. as they relate to climate change, without addressing funding for any related expenses. What three (3) specific solutions would you propose to address climate change, and how would these proposals be funded?

First, we need to ensure we stay engaged with our State legislators to be sure that unfunded mandates are not approved. I have been working on addressing climate change through the update of our County's general plan. Through the General Plan, that is adopted by the County Council, we can direct our land use policies to discourage growth in vulnerable areas. We can also prioritize our CIP investment strategy to ensure that any projects that may be impacted by sea level rise are built to adapt. Finally, we can lead by example to reduce reliance on fossil fuels by installing photo voltaic systems on county facilities and converting our mass transit buses to another fuel source like hydrogen. Some of these projects will be budget neutral but for additional capital funds, we can access the State's revolving loan program and seek federal grant funding opportunities.

6. In 2015, the state legislature adopted a renewable portfolio standard (RPS) of 100 percent by the year 2045, positioning Hawai'i to become the first U.S. state to produce all its electricity from local renewable energy sources and establishing interim targets of 30 percent by 2020, 40 percent by 2030, and 70 percent by 2040. What is your position on expanding geothermal and/or other forms of renewable energy on Hawai'i Island?

I support exploring and encouraging private investment in all sources of renewable energy. Our island has the resources available to lead the State in this effort and this can also help to diversify and grow our economy. However, we do need to ensure that any of these uses occur in areas and at scales that will not impact our natural and cultural resources, by ensuring that they go through the proper environmental and permitting reviews.

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7. What are two (2) things you like about the Community Development Plan (CDP) in your district that are working well? What are two (2) things in your district's CDP that are not working and why? How would you suggest those issues be addressed/fixd?

As a county long range planner, I contributed to the drafting and the adoption process for our Hamakua Community Development Plan. Since its adoption, the action committee has been appointed but due to the Planning Director prioritizing the completion of the General Plan, staffing shortages and impacts from COVID 19, the plan hasn't had a chance to be implemented yet. I like how the plan is structured to identify the appropriate county or community implementor. I also like the make-up of the action committee that was appointed, each member has an established community network that can help with implementation. The plan falls short in prioritizing land use and infrastructure decisions that will be needed to encourage economic growth. Also, the plan lacks implementation details that will be needed for decision makers to make hard choices and no what priorities are needed.

8. The appearance of COVID-19 has brought the world economy to a halt and has exposed major faults in local government's blatant reliance on tourism for revenue. What are your plans to jump start and/or diversify the island's economy?

Agriculture has and will remain to be a very important industry to our ensure sustainability and resilience. In my current position as a County planner, I have worked on important planning documents that focus on the preservation of our productive agricultural lands. In my position on the County Council, I will prioritize funding for infrastructure projects that will support the agriculture industry in my district and on island.

Hawaii is also primed to increase our technology, such as alternative power and information and technology, and health and wellness industries. Our position in the middle of the pacific gives us a unique position to serve the greater pacific area with these sectors. We also have an aging population that will become more reliant on the need for state of the art health and wellness facilities. In my current position as a County planner, I understand the land use and permitting processes and the infrastructure needs for these types of innovative facilities. As a County Council member, I would prioritize modernizing our codes to identify designated areas to allow these types of innovative land uses as permitted uses. I would also work to prioritize funding for infrastructure needed to support these uses.

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9. Many municipalities across the country are exploring bond sales to raise capital for improvements to infrastructure, like road and wastewater improvements as an example; things that are sorely in need of attention on Hawaii Island. The County Council just this year advanced a \$103 million bond issue for road projects with Bill 145. What is your view on expanding municipal bond issuance to finance infrastructure while interest rates are historically low?

Unfortunately, most of our county facilities and infrastructure are aging, and in need of major rehabilitation. We also have very little municipal sewer system capacity which hinders our economic development in our towns. We have historically had a low debt to service ratio. In order to make progress on our needed infrastructure investments I would support additional bonds up to the recommended debt ratio.

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