

# Myra J. Van Hoose – County Commission Candidate

## Business Climate / Regulations Issues

- 1. Rate the regulatory climate for business in Escambia County. Is it Good/Fair/Bad? Explain your answer.**

Fair to good. The state and the county have created a business-friendly community and we need to ensure it stays that way. However, there is always room for improvement. We spend tax-payer dollars on attracting businesses and supporting local businesses and don't have enough to show for it. As a former CPA, I know many issues can be uncovered by a thorough review of our county budget. I have already begun pulling a task force together to focus our resources. We must ensure we are supporting efficiency in a strong county government to continue to build public-private partnerships with business. Solid business practice contributes to the high quality of life we want in Escambia County.

- 2. Please provide any examples of how regulations have affected the life of county residents in a positive or negative way.**

We need a master plan in Escambia County that encourages and focuses on quality of life. We currently have significant issues with toxic waste and flooding that could be improved with appropriate enforced regulation. Concrete pits in close proximity to residential communities or those around subdivisions have resulted in adverse effects to neighborhoods and businesses. The county should have a smart plan about growth but without a comprehensive master plan these sorts of errors are inevitable. While business must be the driver of economic prosperity, government must be the driver of environmental regulation and partner to protect our community assets, such as our most important asset, Pensacola Beach.

- 3. Name the top 3 specific county ordinances/regulations you would like to see eliminated. Explain why they should be eliminated.**

## Operations / Infrastructure Issues

- 4. Do you see any overlap or duplication of services between the county and the city? If so, what services, and how could these services be consolidated?**

I'd be focused on helping Escambia County to become more competitive in the region by a thorough review of ordinances to reduce redundancy, overlap, and duplication. The goal is to free resources, creating efficiencies in delivery of services to the community. Code enforcement, permitting, and even parking have duplication issues that need resolved. With 102 chapters of Escambia County ordinances, there most certainly must be room for improvement.

**5. Homelessness and panhandling continue to be a significant problem in Escambia County. What are your solutions to this pressing problem that impacts the business community?**

This is a huge issue with various complicated questions as evidenced by all the groups working on this problem and the monies being provided to address it. Cuts in mental health funding at the state and federal level have exacerbated this situation, by adding persons to our homeless population that might not otherwise be if they were being provided appropriate mental health services. One solution to reduce or at least minimize the increase on this particular segment of the homeless population is to work on initiatives like Representative Salzman's mental health task force. I'm encouraged by current work to provide temporary camps and shelters for the homeless while we also focus on the deep-dive analysis into causation to understand the "why's," so that we can determine real long-term sustainable solutions.

**6. Do you believe the county allocates sufficient resources for infrastructure projects? How would you prioritize these projects and fund them?**

The current board often finds themselves fighting for projects in their own district without a comprehensive master plan for the community. Our single member districts are largely the driving force behind this inefficient and confrontational method of decision-making and seem to provide a ripe atmosphere for behind closed doors negotiations. However, with a strategic plan, monies that have been too often wasted or hoarded in "encumbered accounts," per commissioner could possibly be channeled to services for the county at large. Again, the budget needs a thorough review in "the sunshine" and specific dollars that commissioners have kept for themselves, reallocated. Our infrastructure projects must be prioritized by putting the safety of our local citizens first and ensuring ongoing revenue stream from our tourist industry to fund these necessary projects, such as congestion correction and water management.

**7. What is your opinion of the beach congestion plans that have been proposed? What is your vision for solving this problem?**

I have recently been discussing the two previous studies that addressed this problem years ago. First of all, it saddens me that millions of dollars have been spent in studying the issue and no real action has been taken. And the problem worsens. We know that there are three choke points that create congestion at the beach. Those are the toll booth, the intersection, and the lack of parking in the center area. We have fixed the toll booth as recommended by installing electronics that do not require vehicles to stop at the booth. That was great, even though it took the county almost four years after installing this system to the tune of several million dollars to fully activate it. But it has been activated and has resulted in an increase of about 10% car traffic. However, only taking minimal action like this and not employing a comprehensive plan has resulted in more congestion at the intersection that often backs up through the toll booth during peak times, which was to be expected per the traffic engineers who have studied the issue, thereby making this single tiny piece of the puzzle, a fail. It is unconscionable to continue to ignore the needs of our local folks who simply want to enjoy our beaches with a place to park. I will also note that

lack of parking in the center area, the commercial core, directly hurts our businesses. Additionally, I believe the locals who have to circle or sit idly waiting for a parking space to open up are significantly damaging our environment with their toxic exhaust. As for the intersection, after seeing the overwhelming success of the roundabout at the foot of 17th Avenue, I believe this is an idea we should seriously consider. The beach is our best asset and needs to be treated with the respect we see in the downtown corridor on Palafox. Make the area beautiful and walkable with a combined parking/traffic plan that we have already paid for. Pensacola Beach has a finite land mass which requires focused and courageous decisions to allow it to be what the citizens need for years to come.

**8. A glaring need in our community is for a facility that has adequate meeting space for conventions and events. What is your position on such a facility?**

I would need to see the actual demand for conventions before moving forward on a costly expense such as this. The Emerald Coast convention center on Okaloosa Island has spent years trying to get its footing. If I were to see the demand exists and that there was an adequate number of lodging units to support a convention space, and appropriate transportation, I would explore this option. We need to link up the studies of planned growth of hotel rooms and convention space, with transportation, examining our airport and rail capacity. A comprehensive master plan for the county that allows for conventioners to be moved through without increasing traffic congestion or over-burdening our resources. Currently we do not have the infrastructure to support it, nor the labor force.

**9. What would your Five Year Plan for Escambia County look like?**

Our county services appear to be broken in a lot of areas. Escambia County ranks near the bottom in the state on metrics related to our economy, education, toxic releases, and many more areas. My 5-year plan will, at the minimum, address these existing failures with reasonable solutions and the expectations of bringing our community into a recognizable healthy environment. Specifically, we need a comprehensive plan for infrastructure spending, protecting our environment, building up and ensuring we have a competitive, trained and supported law enforcement agency, improving our educational outcomes to create and support a solid workforce by focusing on equitable solutions to bridge the achievement gap in our county and to support families. We should visualize the quality of life we want five years from now and work backwards to create action steps to achieve those goals.

## **Economic Development Issues**

**10. What role should county government take in attracting new businesses to the area? What types of jobs would you like to see growing in Escambia County? Be specific.**

Government should provide the environment for businesses to thrive. Local governments who are currently the most effective at attracting new business understand that the quality of place matters much more than incentives. With our amazing beaches and vibrant downtown combined with our low cost of living state, Escambia County should be a magnet for talent which means a

magnet for businesses. We must ensure that infrastructure and public safety and our education system are not detriments to attracting new commerce.

**11. What is your vision for the various commerce parks or potential sites throughout Escambia County?**

Commerce parks in Escambia County appear to be losing ventures. We are failing at key metrics to attract business which makes sustaining commerce parks even more difficult. We need a comprehensive third-party review of the viability of all of them. I would be interested in any data the county has collected to date regarding this very visible problem. We can see that the Tech-Park and the Mid-County commerce parks remain largely unfilled and true viability needs to be considered. However, I would also point out that the Navy Federal commerce park is a beautiful thriving area and a real success story. We should be excited to have Navy Fed and their commitment to this community here and focus on what we can mirror in that effort to reproduce other success stories, or to use as a tool to determine viability of other commerce parks.

**12. What should the county do with excess properties that it owns? Be specific.**

The county should not be in the real estate business. I understand as a former CPA that it is smart for individuals to save money and acquire assets. However, that is not how taxpayer funds should be treated. If vacant land is not being utilized by the county it should be sold and its proceeds used to benefit the citizens. Monies such as LOST funds should not be reserved, but rather the tax that citizens have voted upon themselves should be used for those citizens.

**13. Tourism is an integral part of Escambia County's economy. In what ways can the county commission support tourism in Escambia County? Be specific.**

Infrastructure at and to our beaches should be our number one priority. We need to honor our beach as our greatest asset. We need to assess the proper utilization of the beach land mass, and create clean, walkable space, along with parking, and certainly ensure waterfront areas are safe and protected not only at the beach but all over the county. We have models of better waterfront utilization in cities all over the country. We could start by moving county building spaces away from waterfront areas. Secondly, the county commission authorizes tens of millions of dollars each year for tourism. The best support we as a commission can provide is to ensure these dollars are effective in servicing our customers. Financial commitments are important, but so are financial controls and measurements on effectiveness. We need a significant and effective marketing campaign and beyond that focus on our beaches and our county in the areas of sports tourism, eco-tourism and a proper exploration of possible convention and conferencing opportunities which could be acted upon with these dollars if the opportunity presents itself.

**14. What are the top transportation projects needed to sustain the growth that we are experiencing in Escambia County?**

We have no comprehensive transportation plan to connect a growing airport with the downtown or beach area, our transportation for local workers is significantly lacking and we have no rail system that connects passengers with major locations in our area, let alone to neighboring metropolitan areas. As we talk about building a convention center and attracting more jobs, we have to realize that infrastructure must come first. We currently have significant traffic issues to Pensacola Beach, the Beulah area, and Sorrento Road, aka Gulf Beach Highway. We have far too many accidents that can be prevented with appropriately sized lanes, number of lanes, and lighting in needed areas. We have some absurd intersections and traffic jams to work through near the 9th and Brent and Airport area as well as the 9th and Langley intersections. Scenic Highway near Creighton seems to suffer many car accidents. The Cordova Mall area is becoming more and more congested. Accident statistics need to be studied and plans to reduce those numbers created.