



## 2017 City Council Candidate Questionnaire

The Missoula Organization of REALTORS® is the voice of the Missoula real estate industry. Our more than 600 members would like to know your thoughts on important issues that affect them. We thank you for being specific in your responses.

MOR has endorsed candidates in past elections, and may do so in these elections. If we consider an endorsement in your race, we may ask you and your opponent(s) to each meet with us for candidate interviews. Endorsement decisions are made by the Board of Directors.

Please return the questionnaire by **Friday, July 28** to Sam Sill at [ssill@missoularealestate.com](mailto:ssill@missoularealestate.com).

### **BACKGROUND**

Name: Julie A. Merritt

Office You Are Seeking: City Council Ward 6

Mailing Address: 305 Augusta Dr

City & Zip Code: Missoula 59801

Phone: 406-207-2358

Email: [juliemerritt4citycouncil@gmail.com](mailto:juliemerritt4citycouncil@gmail.com)

### **CAMPAIGN ORGANIZATION**

Treasurer's Name, Address and Phone Number: Scott Manning 2205 Westfield Ct Missoula, MT 59801 406-544-9967

Will you accept PAC contributions? NA

### **ISSUES**

- 1) The median home price in the Missoula urban area increased from \$209,700 in 2012 to \$255,000 in 2016. Over that same period, the median income for a four-person family in Missoula decreased from \$62,800 to \$61,600. As a result, homeownership is increasingly out of reach for many Missoula families. This rapid increase in home prices is primarily because of a shortage of homes in affordable price ranges. This shortage is due in part to increasing costs of land, lot development, infrastructure, and building costs. To address this lack of affordability, the City of Missoula formed the Office of Housing and Community Development and intends to formulate a city housing policy. For this policy to be successful, it must be arrived at through private and public sector

collaboration, and focus on both regulatory reform and development incentives. **As a member of the City Council, which specific policy changes, if any, would you support to help increase the affordability of housing?**

As I understand it, part of the reason for the shortage in housing is a major lack of development for several years during and immediately after the recession. We will have to make some changes in order to encourage new housing to be built at a high rate. I would like to see incentives for developers such as reducing landscaping and activity area requirements for high density multi-family housing developments. I think we need to stop micromanaging the amount of shrubs, trees, and grass are included in landscaping. We could allow a larger percentage of smaller parking spaces. We need to consider some trade-offs and recognize that projects needs to pencil out with a certain profit margin or they simply will not be done. Increased impact fees won't come out of a developer's pocket, they will simply get passed along to the buyer/renter. This does nothing to reduce housing costs. Decisions from the Development Services office need to be based on MCA, ARM, zoning and other applicable laws and rules NOT on internal policy. To the extent there are catch-22s in the codes, we need to resolve those.

We also need to work on the other side of that equation and take steps to encourage more well-paying jobs to the area.

- 2) How to best preserve agricultural land continues to be a subject of debate. In 2016, Missoula County Commissioners unanimously rejected a proposal to require developers of lands with soils designated as important to agriculture to pay a per-acre mitigation fee or set aside one acre of similar land for each acre developed. A coalition of the development community, business community, farm families, and a conservation group opposed the proposal because it would create an undesirable development pattern, hurt farm families, worsen housing affordability, and jeopardize voluntary conservation of agricultural land. Consider how such a policy would fit the urban fringe area where we have already invested in schools, parks, trails, roads, sewer, and other infrastructure. **Should the City of Missoula adopt regulations similar to what was proposed for the county in order to preserve agricultural land? Or should the city focus on supporting voluntary conservation efforts?**

I believe preservation of agricultural property should be voluntary. It seems inappropriate to me, given the exorbitant cost of land within the City limits, to consider requiring preservation of land for agricultural use. Within our City limits, we need residential, commercial, office space, etc. Open space within the City limits should be available for parks and recreational opportunities. While I fully support the efforts of organizations such as Garden City Harvest and community gardens, I think it is wrong to force landowners to set aside such large percentages of their property for preservation of agricultural soils. I am concerned that if such a policy were to be implemented that the land set aside would be too large to mow and too small to farm resulting in large

weed patches that are not maintained. Any regulations of this nature are likely to have serious consequences and should not be considered lightly.

- 3) Inclusionary zoning is a controversial policy tool some local governments have used to try to increase the supply of affordable housing. Essentially, a jurisdiction changes its zoning to require that a certain percentage of housing units within a proposed development are affordable for lower income consumers. In some cases, the developer may be granted a density bonus or other regulatory incentives in return. Critics say that while inclusionary zoning may create affordable housing units for a few, the cost of these affordable units is passed on to consumers of market rate housing. Consequently, in the eyes of its critics, inclusionary zoning may not help or may even worsen the housing affordability issue it was designed to address. **Is inclusionary zoning an appropriate policy tool for addressing Missoula's lack of housing affordability?**

This policy has been a failure in Bozeman and it is hard to imagine how it would be much more successful in Missoula. That being said, I believe it would be worthwhile to talk with developers and City staff in the Bozeman area about why it has not been successful there. I'm sure there is a lesson to be learned. I agree that the costs simply get passed off onto the buyers of the market rate housing. This puts the burden of affordable housing on a small number of people when it is, in my opinion, a concern of the larger community. I think Missoula needs to consider a wide variety of tools and incentives to encourage well-planned development. Increasing the inventory of available housing will drive prices down without what amounts to an added tax targeted at buyers of market rate housing units.

- 4) Property taxes are the primary source of funding for Montana cities. The City of Missoula's property tax rate has steadily increased since the end of the recession. Consider the balance between providing services and infrastructure and city taxpayers' ability to pay. **In your opinion, has the City of Missoula struck the right balance?**

I think property tax rates are not in line with the taxpayers' ability to pay, the burden is way too high. However, I don't see this as a situation that simply pits property-tax payers against City services and infrastructure. Rather I believe we need to expand the tax base in order to relieve the pressure on property owners. I would love to see the local option sales tax get approved so we can capture more money from the thousands of tourists who visit every year. We also need to encourage growth of business and industry so they can contribute a larger percentage of the City's revenues.