

Columbia County Commissioner Candidate Responses

Ten questions were mailed to all registered candidates for Columbia County Commissioner on March 16, 2015. The questions were developed by the Joint Governmental Affairs Committee of the Columbia Montour Chamber of Commerce and Columbia-Montour Visitors Bureau. The following are responses that were submitted by April 1. Responses have been reformatted only for aggregation and consistency of presentation, but otherwise not edited. The following candidates submitted responses:

Crystal A. Deiterich (R)
David M. Kovach (D)
Richard C. Ridgway (R)
Chris E. Young (R)

Crystal Deiterich's responses have been removed as she is not on the November ballot. Tim Burke (D) did not submit responses.

1) As a Commissioner, what is the process by which one should gather information and set goals and priorities?

Kovach: When gathering information one must look at the issue from all sides, discuss with all groups involved. How is the county going to benefit. You must look to see where the county is, what the county is doing well, what could the county be doing better.

Are we prepared for the next opportunity? Are we prepared for the next disaster?

Where do we want the county to be in 5 years? 10 years?

Ridgway: Meet regularly with different areas of County. Recent week was at Senior Center in Wilburton, attended Berwick Council meeting and attended Farm Bureau meeting.

Young: Listen, listen and then listen some more. I prefer going to casual settings — like restaurants — and meeting with the people. It's best to hear from all sides of an issue and most important to pay attention to the side you don't agree with. The people will set the goals and priorities, not the elected official if they are paying attention.

2) How do you define "quality of life" for the citizens of the county, and what is the role of the Commissioners in sustaining/improving the quality of life in the county?

Kovach: Quality of life can be determined by asking the following questions: Do I have a decent job? Are my children receiving a good education? Are there adequate health care facilities? Is the community that I live in safe? When I'm not working are there walking trails, places to fish, areas to hunt? Are Arts present, etc.

Working with a number of community groups the commissioners can add to a project, get funding to help make it possible, show our support of an effort to the State and/or the Federal government.

Ridgway: Ultimately it is the individual's responsibility to strive for their definition of "quality of life". The Commissioners strive to assist in providing family sustaining jobs and provide the services

required by the County Code in the most cost effective manner.

Young: Quality of life is intrinsic to each individual, but I'll give it my best shot. The foundation for quality of life is jobs and opportunity. If people are working and determine they have opportunity —through higher education, trade school or other job prospects etc. — then they are more apt to feel better about themselves, their family and the community they live in. Quality of life is when your experience exceeds your expectations. When an area has good quality of life people value where they live and in turn become involved in their community to help safeguard what they believe is important for future generations.

3) Are you in favor of special tax levies to support community assets such as public libraries, nature areas/trails, etc.?

Kovach: No. A special tax is still just a tax. Once a tax is instated it is very difficult to stop. A special tax would have to benefit the majority of the county tax payers and I would have to research and look very extensively into it before voting for a special tax.

Ridgway: No.

Young: No.

4) In your opinion, what are the most important existing economic development assets in the county?

Kovach: Even though it's hard to see, agriculture. Also Geisinger, Bloomsburg University, Autoneum are the largest industries. There are numerous medium and small businesses that are very important to the wellbeing of our county.

Ridgway: Our people.

Young: Businesses, business owners, entrepreneurs, Interstates 80 and 81, North Shore Rail Road, Bloomsburg University and Geisinger.

5) What specific local financial incentives do you think should be used to stimulate responsible economic development? What is the role of the Commissioners in encouraging job growth?

Kovach: Tax relief. The commissioners can partner with the two other taxing bodies (municipality, school district).

Ridgway: In very select situations L.E.R.T.A. can be offered. It requires cooperation of County, local municipalities and school district. Should be offered only where unique employment opportunities will be available offering family sustaining wages. Tax free loans can be available to businesses qualifying. Requires participation of a bank. Loans would be through CCIDA which is authority created by Commissioners.

Commissioners have dialogue at least twice a week with various economic groups to help facilitate job growth.

Young: KOZ, LERTA, KIZ. Government doesn't create jobs, but we can create a friendly environment

for business owners and entrepreneurs to thrive.

6) Do you support the growth of natural gas drilling and distribution in the region?

Kovach: In a safe controlled manner. We do not want to endanger the safety of constituents and we must protect the environment. The ongoing project set to run through Columbia County is in the planning process right now. The ability for them to complete this project is approved by the Federal Government. They must meet all of the Federal requirements. The pipe line company is also working with the State and Local governments involved in the project, have conducted public meetings, are meeting with the land owners, and are listening to public concerns.

Ridgway: Yes.

Young: Yes.

7) Please share your views on the optimum approach to developing tourism in the county and how strategic, long-term investment of the county's portion of room tax revenue could support this effort.

Kovach: As part of Economic Development, having a good balance in quality of life items for when I'm not working is important.

How strategic? We are in a battle with every other county and state in the country. Our attractions have to be promoted to entice people to visit Columbia County.

I've been part of several efforts that are benefiting tourism long term. The commissioners used hotel tax money to buy 3/4 mile of creek along Fishing Creek that is now open to the public. The public can fish, picnic, and learn about the ecosystem of a healthy trout stream.

I assisted a local Sportsman club to buy land along Fishing Creek so that it will stay open to the public.

The Commissioners are partnering on a project right now that will enhance our Economic Development by unifying the different development groups in the county to benefit all.

Ridgway: Promotion of area should be expanded to include suburban areas of New Jersey, Maryland and Ohio. Should capitalize on I-80 traffic. County share of tax dollars should be used as seed money. It is the responsibility of the CMVB to promote the area as a tourist destination – putting heads in beds.

Young: Make Columbia County a travel destination by creating experiences specific to our tourism assets. Construct better tourism assets by continuing to partner with organizations like the Fishing Creek Sportsman Association to establish more open water on Columbia County streams. Create a covered bridge trail through way finding and interpretive signage. Launch the long over-due covered bridge app etc.

8) In what areas should there be consolidation or municipal cooperation within the county/region (i.e. municipal services, human services, zoning, corrections, etc.)? Do you feel the number of local municipalities are necessary to adequately provide services and local representation?

Kovach: There are 19 townships that use a council of government to provide zoning. Those townships are providing the service without all of them having to employ their own individuals along with all of the other employee costs in addition to housing them, etc.

Columbia County is currently working with Montour County to provide a number of joint county services. For example the 911 services. Counties can no longer pay for the equipment and keep up with the technology as a standalone county. State funding is not keeping up with the change in technology.

The number of municipalities it takes to provide a service is always a custom fit. It depends on the service provided. Will it actually be a benefit? Will all of the residents be well served? Will the municipalities be willing to partner?

Ridgway: Recent shared study lead to the consolidation of Domestic Relations Service with Montour County. 911 shares services with no less than 4 counties should be reality in coming year. Currently working on prison and transportation services.

Young: Transportation, 911, county jails, economic development, planning, school districts administrative functions, police/fire and ambulance. It would make sense to evaluate municipal/school district and county boundaries after each census.

9) Should the county engage in more public/private partnerships to provide services and growth opportunities? If so, can you give examples where this approach now works well and/or would work well?

Kovach: YES. The Kawneer Flood Wall Money from the State and Kawneer. The county was the applicant and is the owner of the wall protecting 400 jobs. This allows new investments at the Bloomsburg site.

The Columbia County flood wall protecting Brewers, Autoneum, and old Windsor plant and will extend to just short of the Bloomsburg School. The funding will come from the Federal state government and Autoneum. The county commissioners are the applicant and owners of this wall protecting 700 plus jobs.

Ridgway: Yes. Great when everyone has skin in the game. Examples are Columbia County Flood Protection system and Kawneer flood protection.

Young: Yes. Columbia/Montour COG for Economic Development. Kawneer and Autoneum flood protection systems.

10) What do you see as the county's role in flood protection and mitigation and what efforts would you pursue as commissioner in these areas?

Kovach: The county is involved in all disasters. As an incident grows and overwhelms a local municipality's resources, they turn to the county which will man its EOC (Emergency Operation Center) As the County's resources are overwhelmed they will sign a declaration of emergency, allowing the county to receive help from the State and if the incident becomes large enough it will go to the Federal level.

The county is the contact for everything during an emergency between local municipalities and the

State.

Working with the State and Federal agencies the county helps local governments, homes owners, and business to recover; making repairs to infrastructure and work to get back to some degree of normalcy. The County works with both the State and Federal governments to get funding for local businesses and residents to flood proof and relocate out of the danger zone when possible.

Ridgway: Perfect example is Columbia County Flood Protection System. County is the sponsor of the project. As a result of new system a countywide authority will be formed to assist all communities interested in obtaining flood/stormwater grants. Improvements will be necessary to defray costs of flood insurance under the Biggars-Waters Act.

Young: The future is in storm water management. We can't continue to build more or higher flood walls. We have to find a way to better manage storm water. NRCS has a soil health initiative that could play a role. By raising the organic matter and improving soil health more water will infiltrate the ground instead of running off. We need to incentivize soil health, wetland restoration and retention basins.