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An Hour With... Candice S. Miller

Macomb County Public Works Commissioner

BY MELISSA WALSH // ILLUSTRATION BY LARRY COONEY JR.

Political veteran Candice S. Miller was raised on the shores of Lake St. Clair and sold sailboats before entering politics. Since then, Miller has tackled her way, upwind and downwind, through several political offices. With 29 Port Huron-to-Mackinaw races and several Chicago-to-Mackinaw races in her wake, the now-Macomb County Public Works Commissioner spoke with *Hour Detroit* about her job and her dedication to the health of the Great Lakes.

Hour Detroit: You've had a political career of tackling issues over partisanship.

Candice Miller: I think that's true. I mean, I am from Macomb County, which is the home of Reagan Democrats.

You were on the path to become the GOP's pick for Michigan Governor. What influenced your decision to run local in 2016?

Really, I think, my passion for the Great Lakes and seeing all of these sewer overflows and beach closures.

... I just thought, 'We don't have to live this way. I think

we can do better.' Not that I can solve every problem, but I thought we could do better. Many people said, 'Oh my gosh, how can you leave Congress?' I don't live in Washington, D.C. I live in Macomb County. This is my home ... I never thought I'd be there 14 years to begin with. ... I was glad I had all those experiences. I certainly brought them all to bear when we had the interceptor collapse [on 15 Mile Road].

At least you didn't fall into it.

That happened on Christmas Eve, and I took office Jan. 1. [This campaign] had been a very interesting race. ... It was a \$4 million campaign, which is the most expensive countywide campaign in Michigan history. ... There was no transition [and] this office has been under grand jury investigation. ... It's been sort of like living in a movie about infrastructure collapsing. ... That infrastructure collapse was the canary in the coal mine.

You've urged leaders in Oakland County to reduce combined sewer overflows (CSOs) and their discharge into the Red Run Drain. How have they responded?

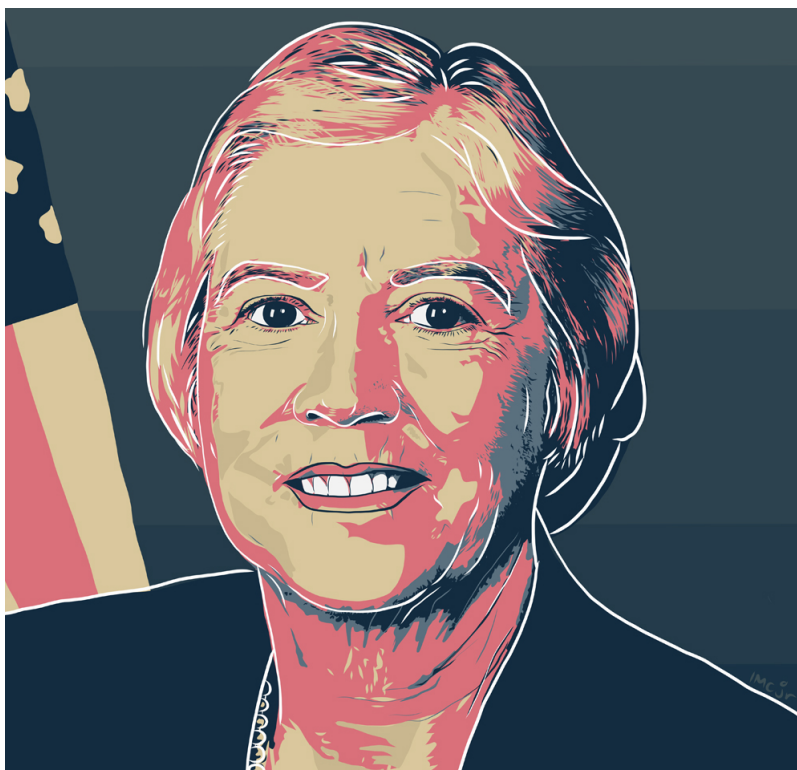
They said they can't do anything because it's too expensive, which is not the correct answer. ... We put out [Requests for Proposals], and we had some very creative bids.

Do you see yourself impacting state legislation?

Yes, I do. ... I am working with a Democrat and a Republican to introduce some legislation to increase the current standard that the MDEQ [Michigan Department of Environmental Quality] has for treatment before discharge.

Do you consider yourself a "Republican environmentalist?"

I guess. I run as a partisan, but I don't really think of this job as a partisan office. ... I'm very fiscally conservative, but certainly on environmental issues, I'm willing to invest some money.



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— Candice S. Miller

Do you foresee beach closings ending on Lake St. Clair?

No. They’ve been going on for decades and generations. ... The reason why a beach closes, from the E.coli standpoint, is not all human. A huge percentage of it is geese. ... We’ve talked about Metropolitan Beach [since it’s Michigan’s] third busiest beach. ... If you want to attract geese, you have a big stretch of green grass, perfectly mowed, then sand, then the water. At Metro Beach, the only thing that’s missing ... is a very large lit buffet sign. ... What you have to do is some dune restoration, beach restoration. Then you plant some native grasses. The geese then think there’s potential of a predator being there. So then they won’t land there. Or you run dogs — border collies. Honestly, it doesn’t cost millions of dollars to fix this stuff.

I don’t remember the beach closing when I was a kid.

Probably not, because we didn’t test. ... Now they’re testing all the time. ... Let me just say this about Lake St. Clair: It’s such a fantastic jewel ... Just with the configuration, how the water comes down the North Channel and St. Clair River. It literally washes out the contents of that lake in about two days. It’s always changing.

Do you feel you’ve had a crash course in sewer systems?

I knew a lot of it, because I had been interested in these issues. But obviously about the mechanics of it all, I’m learning.

What’s your greatest challenge in this role?

I think how we reduce the CSOs. ... I think our approach here is going to be so unique that you’ll see other places in the Great Lakes basin looking at what we’re doing here.

What do the Great Lakes mean to you?

I hopefully share the values of not just the people who live in this immediate area, but in Michigan. I mean, we are the Great Lakes State. It’s in our DNA. It’s our drinking water. It’s how we recreate. It’s everything. ... We are currently managing three projects totaling about \$9 million. Great Lakes Restoration Initiative money. ... It’s amazing how mother nature will revive herself if we just let her breathe.

Would you run for other state- or national-level positions?

Certainly not this year. I don’t think so, really. I like this job. I’m home, and I like that.

Resume

Name: Candice S. Miller

Age: 63

Hometown: St. Clair Shores

Timeline

1979 Entered public service as a Harrison Township Trustee

1980 Elected Harrison Township Supervisor and was the youngest person and first woman to hold the office

1986 Lost to David Bonior in race for Michigan’s 12th Congressional District

1992 Elected Macomb County Treasurer — the first woman in this role and the first Republican to win a county-wide office in the county in more than 60 years

1994 Elected as Michigan’s 40th and first female Secretary of State. Served two terms.

2002 Elected to the U.S. House of Representative, Michigan 10th District. Served seven terms. Has also served as Chairman of the Committee on House Administrations, Vice Chair of the House Committee on Homeland Security, Chairman of the Subcommittee on Border and Maritime Security, and member of the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure.

2017 Took office as the Macomb County Public Works Commissioner after an intense and expensive campaign against an incumbent