

10 Conservation-oriented questions for Routt County Commissioner candidates Sonja Macys and Kathi Meyer from Keep Routt Wild.



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Keep Routt Wild does not endorse candidates for office. However, we are happy to pose questions for candidates and let the voters decide for themselves. We chose 10 conservation-oriented questions for Routt County Commissioner candidates Sonja Macys and Kathi Meyer on topics ranging from Referendum 1A to wolves.

We invited the candidates to make their answers as short or as long as they wished. We did not edit the responses in any way. We are grateful that both candidates agreed to answer these questions and are impressed by their thoughtful answers.

We flipped a coin to decide which candidate would answer the question first for the first question, and then alternated that for each subsequent question to eliminate any positional bias. The questions begin on the following page.

Question 1: What makes you most qualified to become a Routt County Commissioner, and why are you seeking this post?

Kathi Meyer: I'd rather reframe the question as "What makes a highly effective Commissioner". I believe the job should be administrative, not political, much like a corporate board of directors. I will represent all of Routt County—not just one political party, issue or geographic area. I am well versed in land-use issues due to my 15 years on the Planning Commission. And I am a strong student of conservative fiscal management due to my 25 years in the banking and financial management field. I am seeking this job because I don't feel that I'm done with my public service for Routt County.

Sonja Macys: Routt County has been discovered. The decisions we make now will determine our quality of life for decades to come. As your Routt County Commissioner, I will advance the priorities shared by all Routt County residents. My vision, experience, and relationships are aligned with the current and future needs of our County. I am ready to hit the ground running.

Since announcing my candidacy in January, I've visited with folks from all reaches of the County, and I've learned that, regardless of political leanings, we share a common vision for the future. We value our western heritage. We want our quality of life to be as good or better tomorrow as it is today. And we want to ensure that our local workforce has what it needs to thrive.

Thanks to leaders who came before us, and the vision they laid out, Routt County has retained wide open spaces and working agriculture, and we've defended our western slope water. As a former County Commissioner used to say, "Routt County doesn't look like this by accident."

Through citizen-driven planning processes, we have defined a vision for what we want Routt County to be. These processes indicate, time and again, that our shared values include preserving community character, managing growth, finding equitable transportation and childcare solutions, and continually addressing the decades-long affordable housing crisis. As your Routt County Commissioner, I share these values and will advance these priorities.

During my eight-year tenure on the Steamboat Springs City Council, I collaborated closely with Routt County Commissioners, and I understand the vital role a County Commissioner plays. Perhaps, most importantly, the responsibility of a County Commissioner is to oversee and steward County finances.

I was a City Council Member during the great recession, a challenging period that required steady leadership and intense fiscal discipline. We successfully negotiated some of the most difficult financial times and have come out better for it. I am ready for the financial responsibility of being your County Commissioner.

In my second term on Council, we tackled big issues shared by both the City and County, like climate action. Our climate action plan was unanimously supported by the entire Steamboat Springs City Council and all County Commissioners. It was adopted by each municipality within Routt County. As your County Commissioner, I look forward to implementing this plan and immediately addressing drought and wildfire, two of the most visible threats to Routt County.

Like so many people here, I've juggled multiple jobs while also participating in public service. I am proud to have been a part of our dynamic non-profit community, serving as the Executive Director of Yampatika, and ensuring the organization provided equal access to environmental education for every child of Routt County in public

elementary school. I am currently an Engineering Technician for the Division of Water Resources, while also slinging bags for United Ground Express at the Yampa Valley Regional Airport.

Routt County is an expensive place to live, and our local workforce is feeling the pinch. As your County Commissioner, I will collaborate with municipalities to find creative ways support our local workforce, helping to provide Routt County resident with affordable housing, transportation, and equal access to quality healthcare, childcare, and broadband.

As Routt County grows, we are seeing an increase in commuter traffic. The time is now to address these commuter issues before they become unmanageable. During my time on the Steamboat Springs City Council, we adopted a Transportation and Mobility Plan that placed a heavy emphasis on community walkability. At the municipal scale this is a good first step, but at the County level we must think bigger. The time is now.

With the planned obsolescence of coal-fired power plants, there is immense opportunity to repurpose our railway. Routt County residents want to see the Core Trail extended for commuter traffic. A Regional Transportation Authority (RTA), set up to help Routt address transportation issues, could execute on this and so much more. I know, from experience, that RTAs can dramatically improve our quality of life, having helped advance one in Pima County, Arizona while I was serving as Executive Director of The Tucson Audubon Society.

The responsibility shouldered by a County Commissioner is serious, and Routt County residents have an opportunity to elect, in me, an experienced, enthusiastic, forward-thinking public official. Routt County is at a critical juncture, and I can both see and lead it down the path that most benefits all our residents. I'd appreciate your vote!

Question 2: This November, Routt County voters will be asked via Referendum 1A to reauthorize funding of the Purchase for Development Rights (PDR) program, this time extending it for 10 more years. The PDR program started in 1996 and collects a 1.5 mill levy to purchase conservation easements that prohibit development on the land, which is often agricultural open space, and is due to expire in 2025. Do you support or oppose extending this program, and why?

Sonja Macys: I wholeheartedly and unequivocally support the reauthorization of the Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) program.

But rather than call it a program that “prohibits development” as the question is phrased here, I’d call it a program that protects working agriculture, preserves contiguous habitat for wildlife, and helps ranchers stay in business and continue to put western slope water to beneficial use.

With 52% of Routt County’s lands in public hands, some might say that our wildlife has plenty of places to go. However, given the intensified recreation pressure on these public lands, wildlife from these areas is now finding refuge on private lands, including working ranches protected by conservation easements as a part of the PDR program.

The pressures on our ranchers are very real. Drought and rising real estate values, to name a few, have made it very difficult to maintain the family ranch. At my day job at the Colorado Division of Water Resources, every day I see water rights and well permits being transferred from legacy families to new arrivals. Until, and unless, we have another funding mechanism to conserve agricultural lands, water resources and wildlife habitat here in Routt County, we must continue to reauthorize the PDR program to ensure that unnecessary pressure isn’t created on wildlife, water, or ranchers.

Kathi Meyer: I support the PDR program. I think this voter funded initiative has proven highly effective in protecting open space and agricultural lands.

Question 3: Extending the Steamboat Springs Core Trail west ranked very high in the Routt County surveys this year. Do you support extending the Core Trail west, and, if so, what should be the County's financial and planning obligations related to extending the Core Trail to the west?

Kathi Meyer: The Core trail West is important not just as a recreational amenity, but as an important transportation link for hikers, bikers and even as access to the Brown Ranch. The County role is twofold. First in helping fund a part of the cost to improve access to neighborhoods outside the City such as Steamboat II and Silver Spur. Second, by writing letters of support to the State and Federal Agency, we can leverage our direct funding.

Sonja Macys: I support extending the Core Trail west. In fact, I support extending the Core Trail from Stagecoach State Park to Dinosaur National Monument, as has been envisioned in the past by local leaders.

Increasingly, the County is looking to the Core Trail to help alleviate the congestion we see on Highway 40 and support commuters who use it to get to work. This is the right philosophy of serving the working population with responsible transportation development.

However, we need to be looking at all options (including repurposing the railway) to support our local workforce in achieving a safe, productive, and pleasant commute. With the planned obsolescence of the coal mines, now is the time to act on this long-discussed priority. We need leaders who value repurposing past development projects when their intended use has expired.

To achieve the Core Trail extension, it is incumbent upon the County to work creatively and dynamically with landowners who are interested in

providing trail easements. Not all landowners want a trail through, or even near, their property. I respect that.

As your County Commissioner, I will not consider heavy handed tools like condemnation of private lands to acquire easements, just as I never did in my eight years on the Steamboat Springs City Council. The Core Trail can be reasonably extended with cooperative County planning.

Question 4: What do you think is the proper role of Routt County government relating to open space and public lands?

Sonja Macys: Routt County should take every opportunity it can to be involved in public land planning. The County has taken the right approach to open space and public lands by implementing the Purchase of Development Rights program (PDR) and by partnering with land management agencies to play a role in the management of public lands, most recently through the Routt Recreation Roundtable.

I am proud to see the County acknowledge that recreation on public lands can have an impact on County roads and residents. Working to develop and maintain a parking area for snowmobilers in North Routt makes sense. It was done at the request of North Routt citizens, and it balances the needs of recreators with those of nearby residents.

As outdoor recreation rises and as Colorado and Routt County continue to grow in popularity, it is very likely that this recreation will cross between local, state, and federally managed lands. We must take a cross-jurisdictional approach to public lands planning and the State of Colorado is uniquely positioned to lead the nation in this area with its Outdoor Regional Partnerships Initiative. Routt County should make it a top priority to integrate itself into these planning processes.

Kathi Meyer: Since Routt County owns very little land, we should be a facilitator with all user groups. I would hope a commissioner would play a lead role and not delegate it to staff.

Question 5: What are your experiences, if any, in conserving wild places in Routt County?

Kathi Meyer: Unfortunately, none at this time.

Sonja Macys: As Yampatika's Executive Director from 2008-2015, I created and delivered environmental education programs and services that connected thousands of residents and visitors to our natural areas utilizing "Leave no Trace" principles and practices. Here are a few examples of this work:

I developed numerous interpretive signs, manuals, and trainings for the Steamboat Ski Area's Ambassador program, helping Ambassadors interpret nature to guests and interact safely with bears, mountain lions and even moose when they became prevalent at the Ski Area.

I created the Yampa Valley's first Environmental Learning Center at Legacy Ranch. Legacy Ranch was already a conserved property, having been acquired by the City using GOCO and other public funds. However, until Yampatika secured a long-term lease, it was not in use. Creating the Environmental Learning Center allowed us to connect thousands of children and adults to this historic ranch and its vast hay meadow.

My most notable accomplishment at the Ranch, however, was to help the City and the Yampa Valley Land Trust (who managed the conservation easement at the time) understand the importance of the hay meadow to grassland birds, specifically Bobolinks (*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*). [North American grassland birds are in precipitous decline and are extremely vulnerable to climate change](#). Thanks to many volunteers who helped me document the arrival of the Bobolinks and their nesting and foraging behavior, The City has adjusted its haying

lease to ensure that young Bobolinks not only survive but are strong enough to safely fledge and migrate.

From an advocacy standpoint, I've been a lifelong advocate for public lands, having secured hundreds of acres of conservation lands when I was Executive Director of the Tucson Audubon Society, just before moving to Routt County. [I was recognized for this work in 2007 by the Honorable Congressman Raúl Grijalva](#), Chair of the House Natural Resources Committee. Here in Routt County, I am very proud to have successfully lobbied for the [permanent reauthorization of the Land and Water Conservation Fund \(2019\)](#), and [permanent funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund \(2020\)](#). [Click here for a video on that](#). I am also very proud to have [advocated for the CORE Act](#). Thankfully, both of these passed with bipartisan support.

What do I see up next for Routt County's wild places? I will advocate for the reauthorization of the Purchase of Development Rights at the local level. I will also support local efforts to re-join acres that were omitted when the Sarvis Creek Wilderness proposal was adopted. And I will carry forward the collaboration that Routt County has begun by participating in the Routt Recreation Roundtable.

Question 6: Over the past several years, Routt County has witnessed a boom in industrial strength recreation on nearby public lands. While this brings increased economic activity, it also impacts residents, wildlife, and habitat. What would be your plans to mitigate these impacts in Routt County?

Sonja Macys: User conflicts are nothing new to me. Having studied Natural Resource Recreation and Tourism for my master's degree at Colorado State University, I've examined many case studies on user conflict and resource degradation. And each case is different. I don't believe I can articulate a "one size fits all" solution for residents, wildlife and habitat.

For residents, solutions like providing adequate parking and signage help keep visitors from wandering off into residential neighborhoods. Separating out motorized and non-motorized uses, as we have on Rabbit Ears Pass, improves visitor experience. But much of this activity is within the purview of federal and state land managers and as a County Commissioner I will be a strong partner with these agencies. I am informed on the issues and can help serve as a conduit between them and the Routt County constituency.

As for wildlife and habitat, my number one job is to use the tools that we have, such as PDR, to continue to protect agricultural lands that support wildlife in the face of increased recreational use. The number two job is to develop new tools, through the land use planning process, that would provide for wildlife and their habitat. This objective is consistent with the Routt County Planning Department's work of integrating lessons learned in the master planning process into code. Lastly and importantly, we must preserve wildlife corridors and develop wildlife crossings.

Kathi Meyer: Several entities such as Keep Colorado Wild (State Initiative) and Kindness Floats the Boat (Steamboat Chamber) are working on tourist education. The City had Yampa River Rangers two years ago to educate visitors on protecting our riparian waterway

Question 7: The Mad Rabbit Trails Project proposal is a controversial US Forest Service project partially funded by the City of Steamboat Springs that has divided the Routt County community, often pitting mountain bikers against conservationists. The US Forest Service plans to release the EA (Environmental Assessment) soon for public comments. The Routt County Commissioners will have the opportunity to comment on the proposal at that time. Do you believe the County should comment on the proposal, why or why not, and what is your general view about building this project?

Kathi Meyer: Of course the County should comment, but my understanding is that the EA is nearing release. Until I see the proposal it is premature to express an opinion.

Sonja Macys: The County has provided input to this process through the Routt Recreation Roundtable. It ultimately depends on the released EA. If the County Commissioners feel as though the EA has taken input from County residents and incorporated it into the proposal, it might be wise to refrain from comment. However, if the Commissioners feel as though their input has not been heard and considered, it is imperative that we speak up for the County.

Question 8: Some public land projects source more traffic on County roads. Buffalo Pass trail project is a good example. How involved should the County be when similar proposals are made, and what responsibility does the County have to maintain those roads under heavy use?

Sonja Macys: The County should be at the table when there is a proposal to increase use of County roads. With 900+ miles to maintain, the only fiscally responsible thing for the County to do is to assess potential future impacts and costs and attempt to get into agreements that recover these costs. This goes for recreational use or any other activity.

Kathi Meyer: Yes, the County has a responsibility to maintain all its roads and bridges. It is a core function of county government. If the trailhead is on Federal or State land, we should seek partnership to help financially support these access points.

Question 9: The County completed the updated Routt County Master Plan this summer. Generally speaking, what are your impressions of the plan, its strengths and its weaknesses?

Kathi Meyer: The current Plan generally affirms the vision of the previous Master plan, especially identifying future growth areas like Stagecoach and West Steamboat. The Plan also expands the current emphasis on preservation of natural resources and the importance of a well-balanced environment. I can't call it a weakness but visioning documents don't spell out the cost to implement. That is an area that needs a robust discussion.

Sonja Macys: The two key strengths of The Master Plan are process and outcomes.

On process first, 925 responses were received, and these responses generally reflected the population of the County. Extensive public outreach was conducted, and the outreach was not only to the public but also to specific industry groups like the railroad. In addition, the areas that have been designated as "growth areas" had individualized meetings allowing residents to provide specific input into planning for growth in those areas. Second, the Master Plan either included areas that had not previously been included, or redefined areas that has always been included, at the request of the public, to extend its purview. For example, transportation has been redefined as mobility, recognizing that it is so much more than just cars. Sections were also added on climate action and public health, recognizing that our local economy and public health are intricately tied.

On outcomes. The priorities defined by the community through the Master Plan are also my priorities. They include protecting our open spaces, forests, rivers, lakes, and wildlife; conserving and preserve our rural, western, agricultural heritage; directing growth to municipalities

and other targeted areas and providing equitable mobility options. My website further details how I have worked on these issues in the past and how I see their future.

The Master Plan indicates that the highest priority landscapes for conservation were wildlife corridors, with 76.7% of people in agreement. I've been advocating for wildlife corridors and crossings as a City Council Member in all development projects and more recently as a citizen advocate in the Brown Ranch project. In addition, [I've made people aware of the funding that is available for these at the federal level.](#) The recently adopted [SB22-151](#) provides state funding for these types of projects. Rarely do we see such strong alignment among County residents, coupled with such opportunity to fund projects. I am ready to make big strides on wildlife corridors and crossings.

As far as weaknesses, I don't really see any. I'd always like to see more about defending western slope water, but that will come with the Plan's implementation. A challenge more than a weakness is that the Plan requires significant collaboration amongst the County, municipalities, not-for-profit organizations, government agencies, and the private sector. It will take some effort to get all the right players at the table to implement the many great ideas embodied in the Plan.

Question 10: In November 2020, Colorado voters approved Proposition 114, authorizing the reintroduction of gray wolves onto the Colorado western slope, scheduled to begin the end 2023. Routt County was divided on this issue, with approximately 60% opposed and 40% in favor. It is foreseeable that wolf management will become an equally divisive issue as wolves repopulate Routt County. Should Routt County advocate for wolf-related policies, comment on the upcoming EIS (Environmental Impact Statement), or take any other proactive positions either way as Colorado and the US Fish and Wildlife Service proceed with reintroduction plans? Why or why not?

Sonja Macys: If Routt County had a natural resource department staffed by natural resource professionals versed in the topic of wolf reintroduction, it might be appropriate for the County to provide official public comment. However, absent that knowledge and expertise, the County's response should be driven by partner organizations with wolf expertise, constituents, and collaborators.

While there are a handful of people who are highly engaged on this issue, to my knowledge, there is not an established collaborative watchdogging wolf reintroduction in Routt County. The County could play a role here in developing a collaborative that would do two specific things. We could make constituents aware of the re-introduction process, timeline, and opportunity for individual public comment, and we could work towards creating a statement that reflected Routt County's recommendations for re-introduction. The Routt Recreation and Conservation Roundtable has tackled some very difficult issues and a similar model could be applied to analyze Routt County's position on wolf reintroduction.

Kathi Meyer: First, this was a Front Range driven initiative and I wonder if the vote would have been different if the wolves would have been reintroduced throughout the State, not just the Western Slope. I am

concerned about the impact on livestock here in Routt County. I would work with the Ag community to come up with local recommendations to the government entities overseeing this project.