

# County board chairman says government on right track



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Gratiot District 5 Commissioner George Bailey will be seeking a third 2-year term this November.

*Editor's note: For a better-informed public about county government, the Gratiot County Herald is profiling the five elected members of the Gratiot County Board of Commission. Featured this week is board chairman George Bailey. The BOC is a lawmaking body that levies millages, approves budgets and policies for county departments and provides funding for constituent services.*

## By Rosemary Horvath Herald Staff Writer

At the helm of overhauling the Gratiot County administration from stem to stern the past two years has been longtime politician George Bailey.

In spite of sharing a name with the fictional character in the 1946 Christmas classic, “It’s A Wonderful Life” — that would surely gain voter recognition easily — the Ithaca Republican has limited his political whims to the county commission and Ithaca City Council.

“I’ve been in politics 25 or 26 years,” Bailey guessed during a sit-down interview, wearing his trademark plaid shirt and suspenders.

He recalled 1993 when he replaced a member on the Ithaca council who resigned.

Son of a former long-time Ithaca city councilman, Bailey was elected and served 10 years before winning elections as Ithaca mayor for 12 years through the early 2000s.

Five years ago, he returned to local government when he replaced a county commissioner who resigned.

Bailey seeks a third 2-year term in November representing District 5, so far unchallenged.

District 5 includes the city of Ithaca and townships of Elba, Emerson, Hamilton, Lafayette, North Star and Washington.

The district population is 8,072 which is the largest of the five districts both in population and geography.

Too large, in Bailey’s estimation.

Seven years ago, commissioners reduced the county board from seven to five members which enlarged their representative districts.

“I truly believe it would work better if we still had seven members,” reflected Bailey. “It would give us a better representation of the county.”

As it is, Bailey finds getting to monthly city council and township board meetings impractical. He occasionally has nearly 30 hours of meetings in one week alone already.

He serves on boards for Commission on Aging and MidMichigan District Health Department. He represents the county at planning sessions related to the ZFS Ithaca project.

The health department has a local group studying options for septic system regulations, in which Bailey has a role.

At first, Bailey was skeptical instituting regulations were fair because property owners didn't have the finances to repair the systems in the first place.

He has since learned there could be options to help replace systems.

A proposal will come before the Board of Health and county boards in Gratiot, Clinton and Montcalm counties for approval.

"There are 44,000 septic systems in the three counties," Bailey noted, without mentioning how many would be tagged as malfunctioning.

The goal is to concentrate on the "hot spots first" where deficient septic systems drain into the Pine River and Maple River escalating the E.coli bacteria count.

"We want to fix the pollution in every fair and equitable way we can."

"Headed in the right direction," he says, is county government.

Tracey Cordes was hired in late 2016 as the full-time county administrator.

"She is bringing a level of professionalism in this county we haven't had."

Commissioners hired a finance director, human resources director and accounts payable clerk in her wake.

Bonds were sold to refinance the pension liability. More recently, the county joined others from across the state and nation to sue pharmaceutical companies over the opioid crisis.

County policies and goals are being updated and written to reflect what the board and departments actually do, and are required to do by law.

The size of "county government hasn't changed a whole lot as far as government works," Bailey said.

He doesn't want to increase government except he would like to stipulate new housing stock.

A goal he has in mind "is to have taxing entities work together to create an atmosphere so people can build affordable housing."

The county could find ways to "incentivize developers with tax incentives or whatever government can do" to trigger development, he said.

Bailey claims the city of Ithaca and Gratiot County as home but his birthplace is Grand Marais, located on the south shore of Lake Superior in the Upper Peninsula.

Described as the eastern gateway to the Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore, Bailey's mother Geraldine, better known as Gerrie, lives there during the summer and winters in Florida.

Gerrie and husband Harold moved from Grand Marais to Ithaca in 1951 and raised five children.

Harold was personnel manager for Ithaca's Wolverine Shoe Factory, a major employer and one of five locations of the Rockford-based shoe company that later became Wolverine World Wide.

George worked at Wolverine before taking a year of college at Ferris State. He had two years with the U.S. Army.

By then, he and Suzanne Marr of Ithaca were married. They made their home in Ithaca and George returned to Wolverine.

He moved on to Precision Plastic & Die Company that subsequently became Universal Bearings. Bailey retired as plant manager.

Suzanne had been the librarian and later owned a popular spot that was half restaurant and half knitting supply shop.

Motto for the Sip-N-Knit was “where good yarns are spun.”

Suzanne passed away in 2017 from ALS, known as Lou Gehrig’s disease. The parents of Corey and Tricia, George and Suzanne were married 49 years.

Family gatherings with the grandchildren during the summer is a campsite on the Muskegon River near Newaygo.

“In an hour you are in the woods,” Bailey says.