

Joel D. Miller - a biography by Rick Smith

Joel D. Miller is the elected county auditor in Linn County, Iowa's second-largest county and home to the state's second-largest city, Cedar Rapids.

Miller has occupied the post since early 2007 when he won a special election to fill a vacancy. He was easily reelected in 2008, 2012 and 2016.

Now, in 2018, he is running for one of three seats on the Linn County Board of Supervisors, whose policies he has not been bashful about questioning and challenging from time to time.

A most recent case in point: Miller said the board erred when it handpicked a contractor to build the county's new \$28.7-million public health building. The board should have taken sealed, competitive bids, Miller said.

In his election run for supervisor, Miller has changed his party affiliation from Democrat to no-party to make the point that county elections in Iowa, like city elections, should be non-partisan.

Miller's first foray into elective office came in 2001 when he was elected to the non-partisan Robins City Council. He was reelected in 2003 and was elected as Robins' part-time mayor in 2005. This meant that he held two elected offices, county auditor and Robins mayor, for 10 months in 2007.

Upon election as county auditor, Miller, who specialized in information technology and electronics in his private-sector career, immediately moved to upgrade the county's website to provide the public with better access to county information. In subsequent years, he pushed the county to make video recordings of public meetings and insisted that the county publish detailed minutes of meetings in local newspapers.

Miller has advocated for improved oversight of purchases made by the county; called for a limit on the number of county employees who take county-owned cars home after work; questioned managers who added to their salaries by taking cash instead of using vacation; and opposed the practice by some department heads of maintaining special bank accounts outside the purview of the county treasurer.

Miller's tenure in elected office has featured an independence and a willingness to challenge the status quo. He has not been a "dutiful wallflower," The Gazette in Cedar Rapids said of Miller in endorsing him for reelection in 2012. Gazette columnist Todd Dorman has written that Miller has taken a place among the "rattlers of government cages."

Other elected officials have not always agreed with him.

A foreshadowing of future disagreements in county government came in 2006 when, as mayor of Robins, he asked the city clerk to stop bringing her little Shih Tzu dog, Hershey, with her to City Hall. The fast-growing city of Robins had grown beyond its Mayberry RFD days, said Miller, who also owned a Shih Tzu.

One spat with the Board of Supervisors centered on Miller's belief that the elected county auditor could conduct internal audits and reviews of all county departments. The supervisors, most of whom were Democrats like Miller, thought that job belonged to the county's outside auditor and the county's budget and finance directors, who worked for the supervisors. Miller took the issue to court, and in July 2013, the Iowa Court of Appeals largely sided with the supervisors.

To the supervisors' surprise, though, the Iowa Legislature had taken on the part of Miller and other county auditors, and

quietly changed an Iowa law in the spring of 2013 to state that county auditors “shall have the authority to audit ... all county funds and accounts.”

In another disagreement, Miller urged the supervisors to activate video equipment in the supervisors’ board rooms so the public could see meetings on TV and online. The equipment had been installed during a building renovation after Cedar Rapids’ major flood in June 2008. By 2015, when the board refused to turn on the equipment, Miller began using his own video camera to tape meetings and stream the video on YouTube. In 2017, the supervisors gave in and activated the county’s video recording equipment.

During his tenure as auditor, Miller saw county voters expand the number of supervisors from three to five to allow for better representation in the county. Miller had the expectation, as did other proponents of the change, that the total pay of the five would equal what the pay of three had been. He supported advocates in 2015 and 2016 who called for a return to three supervisors after supervisors decided against a permanent pay reduction. Voters agreed to return to three supervisors in November 2016, with 51.18 percent approving and 48.82 percent opposed.

As county auditor, Miller is responsible for elections in the county. In that role, Miller has expressed concern about the low turnout in school and some local government elections. He has discussed the concept of voting by mail to cut the cost of elections and to spur voter participation. He has supported open primaries to allow those not registered by party to participate. He also has worked to expand opportunities for people to register to vote, including registering voters inside buses on public bus routes.

In addition, he has assigned one of his employees to contact those in the military and those living overseas to help them vote back home in Linn County. He also has hired a bilingual employee to help Spanish speakers register to vote. And he has moved county voting sites out of school buildings to ensure that school safety is not compromised on election day.

In informing the public of the results of the 2016 presidential election in Linn County, Miller published the entire list of those receiving write-in votes: 1,703 Linn County voters or 1.5 percent of the total wrote in names rather than vote for presidential candidates on the ballot. The percentage was three times higher than in 2012 and 22 times more than in 2004. Fred Flintstone, Scooby-Doo and Chicago Cubs manager Joe Madden were among those receiving write-in votes.

Miller has opposed voter I.D. laws, but at the same time, has worked hard to check to see if people violate voting laws. He has identified felons who voted without having their voting rights restored, a voter who voted via absentee ballot for himself and two relatives, and five voters who appeared to have voted twice.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security has said Iowa was one of 21 states targeted by Russian hacking attempts in 2016, and as a result, Miller has backed the Board of Supervisors' decision to allow the federal department to scan the county's computer networks on an ongoing basis to identify any vulnerabilities in the county's election system.

“Although there was supposedly no penetration of the system, nonetheless, we think they will be back,” Miller told The Gazette newspaper in February 2018.

Miller grew up on a dairy farm outside Independence, Iowa, where his family milked cows, ran the Limecrest Dairy and

delivered milk to homes. He graduated from Independence High School in 1973.

Interested in a law enforcement career, he worked as a radio dispatcher in the local Buchanan County sheriff's office at age 18. In 1974, he signed on as a deputy in the sheriff's office, and in the next few years, also worked part time as a police officer in small towns in the county. At the same time, he earned an associate degree in police science from Hawkeye Institute of Technology in 1975.

In August 1977, Miller joined the U.S. Army, and achieved the rank of sergeant in the military police during three years of active duty. He followed that with an additional six years of service in the Reserves - primarily the Air National Guard.

Back home in Independence in 1980, he helped his family run a hotel in town while earning a second associate degree in 1983 in electronics engineering technology. Over the next 20-plus years, he worked in a production plant for AT&T; in various manager-level positions for Teleconnect, Telecom, MCI and Worldcom; ran his own technology consulting business; and was project manager for Siemens Transportation Systems' Integrated Local Government. From 2004 until he was elected Linn County auditor in 2007, he worked as IT director and building manager for the Four Oaks social services agency in Cedar Rapids.

Miller began to participate in local Democratic Party politics in 1998 in Linn County and became finance chairman of the county party's Central Committee in 1999. He served as the committee chairman from 2000 through 2004.

He has held local elective office since 2002.

Miller, who will be 63 in June 2018, and his wife, Sylvia, celebrated 40 years of marriage in 2017. They have three adult married children and eight grandchildren.

He holds a bachelor's degree in liberal studies from Regent College, now Excelsior College, Albany, N.Y., through a distance-learning program.

He was appointed to the statewide Auditors' Advisory Group in 2015.