

Daily News candidate interview: Sen. Janette Millin Young

By A.J. RAO
Daily News Staff

ST. THOMAS — Sen. Janette Millin Young's campaign slogan, "Let's Make It Happen," is a fitting backdrop for a candidacy bent on action, results and scrapping what it sees as a slow, mismanaged recovery.

The four-term senator, who recently sat down with The Daily News to discuss her candidacy for governor, said of all the problems afflicting the territory, the lack of proper management to effect change — and to do so quickly — is arguably the most salient.

"In the Virgin Islands, there is no focus and no management," Millin Young said. "You need managers in place who will pay attention to deadlines and do the work — it is that simple."

Millin Young, an independent who shares the fourth ballot slot with her lieutenant governor pick, Edgar Bengoa, said her team intends to accelerate progress by various means, from revitalizing economic development to embracing innovation and not letting long-term goals fall by the wayside.

As the daughter of former Lt. Gov. Henry Millin — and as a former public information officer — Millin Young believes she has a deep-rooted sense of public service and what it takes to engender trust with the people, a trust which, according to her, is deeply lacking with the current administration.

"In this type of position, more than know-how, you have to be inspirational and you have to lead by example," Millin Young said. "Right now, this community doesn't have somebody who leads by example. It's more like 'I can do what you can't do' — and that's not proper."

Recovery

Millin Young showed little hesitation blasting the V.I. Territorial Emergency Management Agency for what she said was its lack of preparedness before last year's storms and its inability to communicate with the public in the aftermath.

Taking particular aim at VITEMA Director Mona Barnes, the senator berated VITEMA's leadership for keeping people at arm's length and insisting they had things under control when they really didn't.

"VITEMA kept saying 'move away, we got this,' but they didn't have it, not then and still not today — they failed test after test," Millin Young said. "I am very surprised that someone who is sitting there with a military background has failed us so miserably. This is a community calling for changes at the head of VITEMA. We need persons at the helm who are present and organized."

As for Gov. Kenneth Mapp, Millin Young criticized what she characterized as his inability to spend recovery dollars properly and prove to the federal government that the Virgin Islands can indeed be trusted with millions in reimbursable expenses.

"We're very fortunate to get 100 percent reimbursables for the aftermath of these hurricanes, but the key word is 'reimbursable' and this government has not been able to spend in order to be reimbursed," she said. "The part that [Mapp] doesn't get is that when something is reimbursable, you have to meet certain requirements and use funds the way they are supposed to be used. I don't believe there is a lot of trust from the federal government and we have to show that we can spend in a proper way that can be reimbursed."

Millin Young said the government should take the initiative and use this opportunity of incoming funds to capitalize on other industries, from agriculture and manufacturing to marine and sports tourism — all of which can bring much-needed revenue and employment to the territory.

A lack of creativity, she said, has been a major hurdle to the recovery, as evidenced by the pace of school modulars.

"I kept trying to call the governor to tell him that there were options for our students to get back to school right away with the modulars," she said. "We had a military force, civil engineers who were sitting by the airport and not doing what they were called to do. All they needed was a call

from the governor to go and start and fix those schools because that's their job. We could have had our students studying right away.

"Sometimes it's not a sin to not be ready," she said. "But it is a sin to not take advice, to not get to work because you don't have the creativity or know-how to do it."

Indeed, the senator said an approach like this is applicable to hospitals, too, where instead of rebuilding smaller hospitals, the intent should be to expand and diversify hospital services, luring more doctors and profits to the territory in the process.

"Right now, our health care is just the bare minimum — what Medicaid and Medicare can pay — and we're not delving into the types of procedures that will bring money," she said. "Many of our doctors have left. We have to build and incentivize to bring doctors in different areas of care, and especially care for the elderly."

GERS

Millin Young's multi-pronged strategy for fixing the Government Employees' Retirement System involves paying bills; addressing unfunded liabilities and restoring the ratio of active employee versus retiree.

"For 27 years, almost three decades, we've had administrations who have not been paying what they're supposed to — so one of the main and first things I will do will be to pay," Millin Young said. "There are also unfunded mandates that have been in the works forever and it's going to take more than just me saying 'it has to be done this way.' I believe we need to bring all concerned to the table."

Moreover, she said, government retirees typically eat up — in the first three to five years — everything they have contributed and are therefore maintained by active employees.

Currently, she said, the active employee ratio to the retiree is 1 to 1, when it should be closer to 4 to 1.

"We have to restore job vacancies and put people to work," Millin Young said. "We have lost a lot of government employees and yet we're still paying a whole lot of money in salaries. Something is wrong."

Millin Young chided Mapp for ignoring the GERS Board and telling them to "pack a lunch" instead of displaying leadership and resolving the issues at hand.

"Because of my very nature and background in communications, you could not expect this of me, because I'm always at the table," she said. "I always want to meet. I always want to hear someone else's perspective. I don't believe in the 'one-man or one-woman' show."

Marijuana

Millin Young said she is supportive of medical marijuana but that allowing recreational use should be a gradual process.

"I've come a long way when it comes to my understanding and how I feel about it," she said. "I have participated in the decriminalization because I thought that we were criminalizing a lot of our young men for doing absolutely nothing and now I am a supporter of the medical marijuana."

While acknowledging that recreational marijuana would bring in revenues, Millin Young said she is unsure whether it could "cure the V.I."



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— everything else comes through,” he said.

GERS

Bengoa said the financial malfeasance involving the Government Employees’ Retirement System should be enough to get Gov. Kenneth Mapp impeached.

“Right now, the amount of money that the government has taken out from the employees is \$250 million — and Mapp has only returned \$86 million. This is the employees’ money, the money they worked so hard for,” Bengoa said.

“There’s one simple solution — pay the bill. The government has not paid the GERS in full since 1991. That’s 27 years where they have not paid dollar for dollar of what they have collected from the employee.”

Bengoa said he hopes to attract 100 new companies within his first year that are in line with Economic Development Commission requirements and have a small percentage of their revenue put into an account exclusively for GERS.

“Let’s say out of the 100 companies, 60 percent do the required minimum of having five local employees and let’s say we take a small number like 0.5 percent of the revenue that the government is making off of that one company and send it to a GERS account,” Bengoa said. “You know how many millions of dollars in a year that’s going to be for 100 companies? We’re talking about \$40 million to \$60 million going into the GERS fund.”

Bengoa dismissed the plans of the other gubernatorial candidates, insisting they only extend the life of GERS for a few years.

What GERS needs instead is a serious infusion of cash, he said.

Transparency

As a former president and treasurer of the St. Croix Chamber of Commerce, Bengoa said he has always prided himself on maintaining an open book policy and that such a policy will continue if elected.

“Everything should be open-book,” he said. “My policy is to be as transparent as possible.”

While Bengoa didn’t specify further, he did say the government needs to enhance its interactions with the public, insisting that customer service is a critical component of government that is largely overlooked.

“Customer service on our islands is deplorable,” he said. “When we all go away somewhere, what do we want? We want great customer service. Customer service is essential for the growth of any place, so we got to push for it.”

What else ...

Bengoa said a top priority of his tenure will be to spur entrepreneurship in the Virgin Islands by making the banking and licensing process simpler and more convenient.

“I want to bring in new banks to make it easier for young entrepreneurs to get commercial loans and also to get easier mortgages, which are all parts of growing an economy,” he said. “Also, if you are a brand-new business, as soon as you walk in and pay, you’re walking out of there with a business license. That is one thing that I’ve been fighting for years. And now, once we get elected, that’s the first thing that’s going to happen.”

Bengoa said he would like to have, at a minimum, the Fire Service, Planning and Natural Resources and Licensing and Consumer Affairs in the same building.

“We need to consolidate a lot of this — make the office a one-stop shop,” he said. “We’re going to make it more convenient to renew your license because we can’t keep turning away business.”

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budget,” as some proponents have suggested.

Moreover, she said, the proceeds from the sale of recreational marijuana cannot be used in agencies like Education or Human Services because they receive federal grants and recreational marijuana is still against federal law.

“We have to be very careful about how we proceed,” she said. “We cannot forget that our young people have to understand how it will also affect them going into certain jobs. We have to be very careful that we don’t do ourselves a disservice in terms of the job market for young people.”

Transparency

With a background in public relations and journalism, Millin Young said she is acutely aware of the importance of public disclosure, not only in keeping constituents comfortable with their government but also in driving away any suspicions of impropriety.

“I want to be as open as possible,” she said. “You have my commitment that that’s how I will be, because you haven’t seen anything in my track record that’s been any different. When you keep things to yourself, especially when you’re talking about politics, someone is always going to think there’s an underhanded something to be hidden — so I don’t operate like that.”

Millin Young said each government agency should have a responsive public information officer who is not afraid to divulge information that may upset the sitting governor.

“You don’t need an executive order or a law, you just need to tell whoever is in the position that this is how we’re going to do business now,” Millin Young said. “We’re going to be proactive and share information with the public. And you will see the difference in how the public reacts.”

What else ...

Millin Young said she was against Mapp’s executive order to merge VI Next Generation Network and the Bureau of Information Technology and insisted the decision ultimately hurt businesses that are unable to compete.

She said Viya has been particularly hurt, with Mapp even writing to federal officials to prevent the telecommunications company from receiving federal grants.

“Right now, the governor is intervening and causing harm to a private corporation,” Millin Young said. “He’s trying to protect VINGN. As the chief executive, I too want to protect my government assets, but not at the detriment of a business where people have invested their monies.”

Millin Young also said the VI Port Authority should manage all ports, with WICO becoming more a division under the agency. She added, however, that the Port Authority should not be packed with friends and relatives of the governor, but rather people selected for their competence.

“Right now, we have a couple board members that have no knowledge about the ports,” she said. “So, it is very important that if we get to that big hump of having Port Authority manage everything, that we absolutely have a board of directors that’s knowledgeable.”

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Campaign Events

The St. Thomas District Democratic Committee is hosting an executive meeting at 6 p.m. today at the Democratic headquarters.

Topics for discussion will be poll-watchers and upcoming events. Be on time.

The gubernatorial campaign of Gov. Kenneth Mapp and Lt. Governor Osbert Potter is having a lunch food sale beginning at noon Thursday at their headquarters in Havensight on St. Thomas.

The candidates also will have a meet and greet starting at 6 p.m. Saturday at the By the Sea on St. Thomas.

In its fifth in a series of gubernatorial forums, “Step Up to Truth” presents candidates Albert Bryan and Sen. Tegeza Roach, Democratic nominees for governor and lieutenant governor, at 5:30 p.m. Friday at the University of the Virgin Islands conference centers in both districts.

The program will be simulcast over radio stations WSTA-AM 1340 and WUVI-FM 97.3, and live-streamed via www.wsta.com and www.wuvi.com.

The Committee to Elect Jean A. Forde will host Forde Friday starting at 6 p.m. Friday at Forde headquarters. Food for sale includes barbecue pig-tail plates with potato salad and corn for \$12 and a plate of chicken wings and a johnny cake is \$5.

The campaign will hold a soup sale at Forde Headquarters from 7 to 11 p.m. Saturday. Pumpkin, fish, red sea and chicken soup, as well as goat water will be on sale for \$8 for a small bowl and \$12 for a large bowl.

The St. Thomas chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority is hosting a forum for senatorial and at-large senatorial candidates at 2 p.m. Sunday at the Charlotte Amalie High School auditorium.

The forum is part one of the sorority’s “Still on De Fence” series.

On Oct. 21, the sorority will host a forum for candidates running for governor, lieutenant governor and delegate to Congress at 2 p.m. Oct. 21 at the Charlotte Amalie High School auditorium.

The public is invited to help the Independent Citizens Movement celebrate the ICM Party’s 50th anniversary on Sunday in Emancipation Garden. There will be discussions, speeches, marching bands, re-enactments, entertainment and dancing. Vendors will also be there to sell crafts, food and cultural and traditional items.

For more information call 340-642-5190 or send an email to info@icmparty.com.

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