

## Former Board of Education Chair Tara Ochman Announces Run for First Selectman

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Tara Ochman, a Democrat, member of the Board of Education and its former chairperson, announced Thursday that she is running for first selectman.

"For too long, the talents and experience of our residents have been undervalued, and for too long our town government has just managed the town, but not planned, really, for what's next.," Ochman told a crowd of about 100 people in front of Town Hall at 5:30 p.m.

"Our infrastructure, our roadways, our town-owned land and beaches need improvement," she said. "They've been ignored too long.

"We need to re-evaluate and modernize our emergency response plans. We need workable, user-friendly technology upgrades that allow us to operate efficiently and honor and aid the hard work of our town employees, making access to our town services easier for everyone."

In a prepared statement released to news organizations, town Democratic Chairman David Bayne said: "Tara Ochman is the most experienced and qualified candidate from any party to run for first selectman in a generation. She led the Board of Education — an organization with a budget and headcount that far exceeds that of the Board of Selectman — through tumultuous times including the first year of COVID-19.

"She did so with a degree of professionalism and grace that has not been seen from a Darien leader in

decades. Darien is extremely lucky that Tara has decided to dedicate her time and energy to serve the town as its next first selectman."

### **Political Situation**

The Democratic Town Committee is holding a meeting at 5:30 p.m. on Thursday, July 22 (the town's fireworks display is now scheduled for that night, but hours later). Unlike the past (and unlike the Republican rules), state Democratic Party rules for local elections have eliminated the town caucus and now have town committees endorse candidates, who may then be challenged in a primary.

Ochman will run with two other Board of Selectmen candidates — Michael Burke and incumbent Selectman Sarah Neumann.

With First Selectman Jayme Stevenson having announced she won't be running for a sixth two-year term, the Darien Republican Town Committee has endorsed Monica McNally for first selectman. Their endorsement would need to be ratified in a party caucus, and if McNally is challenged by someone else with enough support in the party, in a party primary. Joe Warren, a member of the Darien Housing Commission, is said to be preparing a challenge, multiple sources have told *Darienite.com*.

"I feel very confident that we're going to make a great showing and win this race," Bayne said. He pointed out that voter registration has shrunk for the GOP in town, with many Republicans changing their registration to unaffiliated (now at about 38% of town voters, with the GOP now in second-place, at 35%) and Democrats have seen increasing registration (at about 26%), perhaps in part due to New York City residents moving in during the pandemic, he said.

"This is going to be a tight race," Bayne continued, "but I think it's very winnable."

### **Ochman's Background**

Ochman graduated from Joel Barlow High School in Redding in 1995 and from Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania in 1999 (with a bachelor's degree in government and law).

Before moving to Darien, she served as executive director for The New Democracy Project, a public policy institute in New York City, as well as deputy finance director and finance director of various New York City and New York state political campaigns.

In Darien, she was a board member for St. Luke's Parish School from 2008 to 2016, a member of the Darien Library Board of Trustees from 2011 to 2016 (and fundraising chair in 2015 and 2016). She was active in the Ox Ridge Parent Teacher Organization from 2013 to 2016 and, in 2013 and 2014, in the Council of Darien School Parents (the umbrella organization of Darien PTOs).

She was first elected to the Board of Education in 2016 and was chairperson from 2017 to 2020.

She's been married for 21 years to Charles Ochman — "a wonderful, supportive Republican husband," she notes in her resume — and they live at 476 Mansfield Ave. The couple have three children and two dogs. She has been a skier, field hockey player, boater and avid soccer fan.

### **Affordable Housing and Other Issues Involving the State**

In part her short speech in front of Town Hall, Ochman said:

"We cannot continue to cower in fear at the politics coming from Hartford or shy away from the important conversations in our state or our region. Darien must lead. We must invite that dialogue and acknowledge where there is work to do, but be unapologetic about our successes, because if there's any place with the expertise, the heart and the know-how to achieve, it's here in our hometown of Darien."

Ochman was asked by Darienite.com after her speech whether or not she was specifically referring to the issue of aggressively expanding affordable housing in town, which town elected officials have warned was in danger of being forced on Darien by the state.

She replied: "I don't think it's particularly that. What we have been hearing is fear of losing local control [in various ways]. We need to open up the door and sit at the table — we really should be able to join that conversation, rather than that conversation not happening."

### **Ochman's Speech: Full Text**

*Here's a transcript of Ochman's announcement speech, as delivered (it lasted about 3 minutes, 45 seconds):*

This election is about choices. We can choose to continue to stagnate, to complain and to put off difficult decisions, or we can choose to innovate, invest and build for our future.

For too long, the talents and experience of our residents have been undervalued, and for too long our town government has just managed the town, but not planned, really, for what's next.

With strong leadership and energy, we can do better.

We can do the hard work necessary to ensure that Darien is a competitive and desirable 21st century town, a place where the next generation will choose to [...] raise their families.

Our infrastructure, our roadways, our town-owned land and beaches need improvement. They've been ignored too long. We need to re-evaluate and modernize our emergency response plans. We need workable, user-friendly technology upgrades that allow us to operate efficiently and honor and aid the hard work of our town employees, making access to our town services easier for everyone.

We cannot continue to cower in fear at the politics coming from Hartford or shy away from the important

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I have been honored to serve as a Democrat on the Board of Education, and I was especially honored to be elected chair by a majority Republican board.

I led the board and the community through leadership changes, three of the lowest budget cycles in recent history and the onslaught of a global pandemic.

I have never lost sight of what is best for our children, their education and our community.

As a Board of Education chair, I believe I have demonstrated my commitment to the town and residents, my work ethic, my integrity and the ability to ensure that residents will have the opportunity to have their voices heard. I know what it takes to develop and lead a collective vision. I will do the same as your first selectman.

I look forward in the coming weeks to speaking with as many of you as possible, to understand your concerns and to share my vision for our town.

I'd like to thank all of you for the support you've already shown. Your phone calls and words of encouragement from Democrats, unaffiliated [voters], Republicans alike urging me to seek this office of first selectman have meant the world to me.

I have worked in service of this town for many years, and I believe in it and all that it can be. This election is about the future of Darien. We cannot go backward.

Under my leadership as first selectman, together, we can make Darien a better place to live, to work and to own a business.

Thank you so much, and here we go!