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State Senate Candidates in March 2 Special Election Answers to League of Women Voters Questions

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The Darien League of Women Voters has released its questionnaire to candidates in the state Senate District 27 special election on March 2 and their answers.

The candidates are running to fill the seat recently vacated by Carlo Leone, who is taking a position in the state Department of Transportation.

Here's the complete document, which the League released on Tuesday:

2021 Voters' Guide for Candidates for State Senatorial District 27

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(State Senator for Darien Districts 2 and 4)

Compiled as a public service by the League of Women Voters of Darien.

This is a special election to fill a vacancy in the seat created by the resignation of Sen. Carlo Leone.

Vote Tuesday, March 2 — Democracy is not a spectator sport!

Polling location for both Districts 2 and 4: Darien Town Hall Gymnasium, 2 Renshaw Road. Open 6 a.m. to 8 p.m.

The League of Women Voters is a nonpartisan, non-profit organization that encourages the informed and active participation of all citizens in the process of government. The LWV of Darien is a local group of both men and women who strive to improve the quality of democracy by increasing voters' knowledge of candidates and issues. Visit LWVDarien.org to learn more.

The Voters' Guide is designed to provide information about the candidates to the public in a nonpartisan and balanced way to assist them in casting an informed vote on Election Day.

Six office-related questions were submitted to candidates for State Senatorial District 27. Responses were limited to a specific word count and are printed exactly as submitted by the candidates.

For every ballot position, a voter may write in the name of someone who is not listed as a candidate on a separate line at the bottom of the ballot for "Write-In Votes." In the State of Connecticut for those votes to be counted, the individual whose name is being written in, must have registered with the Secretary of State.

Note: All offices appear in the order in which they appear on the ballot

Candidates for State Senator—Senatorial District 27

Vote for one to fill a vacancy. Term: March 2, 2021 to Jan. 4, 2023

Pat Billie Miller

Democratic Party 95 Liberty St. Unit4A, Stamford PatBillieMiller.com

*1. Considering your education, employment experience, political involvement, and personal attributes, what qualifications do you have to be a good State Senator?
(100 words or less)*

For 12 years, I've served the people of the [145th House District](#) and during my tenure I've governed with honesty, integrity and built relationships with elected officials in the House and the Senate in order to navigate the legislative process and deliver results for my community.

In addition to serving as an elected official, I have almost 30 years of professional experience working in the affordable housing industry. I pride myself on my ability to listen to others and negotiate and I believe that this, along with my professional and political experience, makes me qualified to be a good state senator.

2. Do you support SJ-3, "Resolution proposing an amendment to the state constitution to permit early voting"? Reasons for your position. (50 words or less)

I support amending our state constitution to permit early voting. Early voting removes barriers that prevent citizens from participating in the democratic process. It also gives electors the flexibility to vote at their convenience, rather than during a limited window of time. Our democracy benefits when we all can participate.

3. Do you support SJ-4 "Resolution proposing an amendment to the state constitution to permit no-excuse absentee voting"? Reasons for your position. (50 words or less)

I support amending our state constitution to permit no-excuse absentee voting. No-excuse absentee voting allows voters who are traditionally disenfranchised from the voting process the opportunity to cast their vote. It increases voter turnout and it can also be a potential savings to municipalities by eliminating the application process.

4. The biennium state budget that begins July 1, 2021 is currently projected to run a deficit exceeding \$1 billion in each of its respective years. Many proposals are being suggested for reducing the deficit and possibly enabling increased spending. What are your specific thoughts on how the budget deficits should be addressed? (150 words or less)

Budget deficits should be addressed by increasing revenue and making appropriate spending adjustments. I am grateful that our state will be receiving one-time federal revenues to help our current budget deficit.

I believe that the increase in revenues we have seen over the past few months is indicative that Connecticut's recovery from COVID-19 is going better than projected.

I believe some modest tax increases may be necessary but I don't believe that by the time we adopt the new biennium budget that we will still be facing the full \$1 billion deficit.

We also may be able to mitigate some of the revenue losses by making adjustments to existing tax credits.

There are also proposals, such as sports betting, that are projected to bring in a new source of revenue for the state.

5. Are there any budget areas in which you would like to see spending increased or decreased? Be specific. (150 words or less)

I would like to see funding increased for education and higher education, particularly for expanding access to technology. We know that there are students who still do not have access to the technology they need for virtual learning during this pandemic.

Funding also needs to be prioritized toward ensuring there are enough certified educators to fill the gap from those who have retired and others who have taken time off during the pandemic. We need to also provide funding for small businesses that continue to struggle.

I support using bond funds for the Small Businesses Express Program, which provides grants and loans to small businesses to help them stay open during this difficult time.

I also support sales tax exemptions and other programs to help offset the costs of businesses purchasing PPE and other resources needed during the pandemic.

6. Affordable housing is an ongoing concern. What is your reaction to the various programs being proposed (e.g., altering zoning laws to encourage transit-oriented development or taxing communities that fail to meet affordable housing targets etc.) to address this concern? Please be specific about your thoughts on ways to encourage more affordable housing. (150 words or less)

After working in the industry for almost 30 years, I know firsthand how affordable housing positively impacts the lives of families and how important it is to a community. It gives opportunities to families, especially children, that improves their quality of life by freeing income that is needed for other essentials like food and health care.

I think relaxing restrictive zoning laws is necessary in order to remove the barriers that prevent the development of affordable housing.

However, penalizing a community should be a last resort. I believe we could better promote the development of affordable housing by offering towns incentives. For instance, this session there is a bill, HB 5681, that incentivizes the adoption of more inclusive zoning in certain towns by giving 10 additional reimbursement points on school construction grants.

Forward thinking policies such as this are what we need to

implement to address this issue.

Joshua A. Esses

Republican Party 1 Harbor Point Road, Unit 400, Stamford, [EssesforCT.com](https://essesforCT.com).

1. Considering your education, employment experience, political involvement, and personal attributes, what qualifications do you have to be a good State Senator? (100 words or less)

As a restructuring lawyer for governments and public pension systems in distress, I am an expert in state and municipal finance, and understand both the nature of Connecticut's financial difficulties, and what will (and won't) work to restore our fiscal footing.

As a Stamford native and graduate of Stamford's public schools, I understand the incredible opportunities afforded to every family and child growing up in Stamford and Darien. I also understand that, unless we keep the cost of living down and the quality of our schools up, these opportunities won't be here forever.

2. Do you support SJ-3, "Resolution proposing an amendment to the state constitution to permit early voting"? Reasons for your position. (50 words or less)

No. I support a political process that encourages engaging voters with a candidate's ideas. I believe we've seen a troubling trend of partisan, less informed voting in recent years, and early voting would only exacerbate that trend. Connecticut voters have rejected constitutional amendments allowing early voting, and I would too.

3. Do you support SJ-4, "Resolution proposing an amendment to the state constitution to permit no-excuse absentee voting"? Reasons for your position. (50 words or less)

No. As discussed before, I believe early voting leads to less informed voting. Further, we've seen how absentee ballots create distrust in our system, and are prone to errors, such as in Stamford this past November, which found hundreds of misplaced absentee ballots three days after the election.

4. The biennium state budget that begins July 1, 2021 is currently projected to run a deficit exceeding \$1 billion in each of its respective years. Many proposals are being suggested for reducing the deficit and possibly enabling increased spending. What are your specific thoughts on how the budget deficits should be addressed? (150 words or less)

By prioritizing economic growth and investment, the state can increase tax revenue and close budget deficits without raising tax rates at all. Connecticut can adapt to the type of businesses we could be attracting through innovation and technology.

A comprehensive legal and regulatory environment supportive of industries like blockchain and cryptocurrency, for example, could redefine the state's economic vitality.

Collective bargaining agreements need to be reformed to appropriately compensate our state workers. During the height of the pandemic, state employees received 5.5% raises while our neighbors were getting furloughed or laid off.

We must address unfair union contracts that take advantage of the public, and fix our bloated pension and retirement benefits system. Spending on public sector employee wages and retirement benefits crowds out other worthwhile investments.

The \$550 million bailout of Hartford should be discontinued. Stamford and Darien should not pay for Hartford's irresponsibility.

5. Are there any budget areas in which you would like to see spending increased or decreased? Be specific. (150 words or less)

I believe we have a moral, if not legal duty, to compensate businesses that have been affected by the pandemic. We owe these businesses what is called "just compensation." They were closed for the public's health, and the public now owes them through grants that can support those businesses.

The private sector once provided retiree health care benefits, but phased them out because the cost would bankrupt companies. Connecticut continues to provide this benefit and it is bankrupting the State. We need to discontinue this benefit. We also need to return our pension system to solvency by increasing our payments into the system.

Aid to municipalities should be drastically reduced and our towns and cities should be made to live within their means. Property tax exemptions for certain non-profits (excluding religious institutions) should be revisited, which would offset the reduction in municipal aid.

6. Affordable housing is an ongoing concern. What is your reaction to the various programs being proposed (e.g., altering zoning laws to encourage transit-oriented development or taxing communities that fail to meet affordable housing targets, etc.) to address this concern? Please be specific about your thoughts on ways to encourage more affordable housing. (150 words or less)

I am opposed to Hartford dictating how our municipalities structure their communities. Stamford and Darien should be in charge of the zoning laws in Stamford and Darien.

Affordable housing solutions should come from our municipalities, such as, for example, modernizing the

building and permitting process to make construction of all kinds more efficient and cost-effective.

Keeping property taxes low, and the cost of living down more generally, is the best way to enable affordable housing in all our state's communities. To do that, we must reform the state law known as the Municipal Employees Relations Act, which burdens our municipalities with unaffordable labor contracts and fails to reward our highest-achieving public sector workers.

Brian David Merlen

Independent Party 20 Dolsen Place, Apt. 3, Stamford

1. Considering your education, employment experience, political involvement, and personal attributes, what qualifications do you have to be a good State Senator? (100 words or less)

I believe in transparency! Whether it's through organizing on the streets with local police brutality bereavement groups, or against billionaire drug dealers at Purdue Pharma: I pour my heart and soul into my advocacy work.

When I was offered CARES ACT funds and meetings with Connecticut prosecutors on the Sacklers to drop out of the last election, I refused to cut a backroom deal and posted a recording to the public.

Delegates and incumbents alike have told me of further wrongdoing in our Connecticut Democratic Party, along with disgruntled campaign staff that are sick of the corruption. We deserve better!

2. Do you support SJ-3, "Resolution proposing an amendment to the state constitution to permit early voting"? Reasons for your position. (50 words or less)

I do support SJ-3. As we've seen historically, voter turnout increases with more access to early voting and absentee opportunities. I believe nothing should hinder the sacred duty of US citizens to exercise their right to vote.

3. Do you support SJ-4, "Resolution proposing an amendment to the state constitution to permit no-excuse absentee voting"? Reasons for your position. (50 words or less)

I do support SJ-4. I believe absentee ballots are extremely helpful in letting voters have an easier way to vote. Whether we have a pandemic going on or people are simply too busy to wait in lines, it makes sense to let people be able to cast votes as easily as possible. Our goal should be to increase voter turnout by easing these rules.

4. The biennium state budget that begins July 1, 2021 is currently projected to run a deficit exceeding \$1 billion in each of its respective years. Many proposals are being suggested for reducing the deficit and possibly enabling increased spending. What are your specific thoughts

on how the budget deficits should be addressed? (150 words or less)

I believe that we should take the gloves off with Purdue Pharma and retract the fraudulently transferred funds from the Swiss bank accounts. The public health costs of the opioid crisis, if reimbursed properly, would cover our existing state deficits.

I am not prepared to let the Sacklers walk away with \$10+ billion in fraudulently conveyed funds, even if those who previously took lucrative campaign donations off the deaths of our district's youths want to cut them a deal.

We cannot let this fake bankruptcy scam bankrupt our state, where these heinous pill mill schemes operated with impunity. Once we retract the funds from these drug crimes, we will have the resources we need for public health and any shortfalls.

5. Are there any budget areas in which you would like to see spending increased or decreased? Be specific. (150 words or less)

I would love to see Husky for all. Particularly in these difficult times, it's important that we do everything we can to ensure the health and well-being of all our constituents in Connecticut.

Healthcare and housing should not be the reason why folks go bankrupt or struggle. I understand this struggle as a cancer survivor myself. I also believe firmly in the eviction counseling bill. This bill will protect the vulnerable when 40,000 are facing eviction.

I am dedicating my campaign to health and housing issues primarily, along with intersecting issues like racial justice disparities. I believe we need to increase funding in capacities that will actually protect the vulnerable during these unprecedented challenges.

6. Affordable housing is an ongoing concern. What is your reaction to the various programs being proposed (e.g., altering zoning laws to encourage transit-oriented development or taxing communities that fail to meet affordable housing targets, etc.) to address this concern? Please be specific about your thoughts on ways to encourage more affordable housing. (150 words or less)

I fully believe that we should incentivize transit-oriented development. It just makes sense to give developers the incentive to develop in a way that makes mass transit available. I am in favor of taxing communities that fail to meet affordable housing targets.