

20th Anniversary AAUW Candidate Forum: Debates, Agreements and a Few Laughs

by Julie Mackaman

The AAUW Candidate Forum, back after a Covid hiatus, roared back on October 22 at Bennington's Fire House. Some 60 voters turned out to meet and listen to all six State Representative candidates for the BEN-2 and BEN-5 districts, and all six State Senate candidates for Bennington County.



The 12 candidates appeared amicable and relaxed and made good-natured quips throughout the evening.

“It was a daunting task, crafting a procedure and questions that would give each of the candidates a reasonable opportunity to speak,” said moderator Kathy Wagenknecht. “The AAUW questions were formulated to accomplish just that, and I think we succeeded.”



AAUW Bennington president Suzanne Kirkpatrick welcomes the candidates and audience, as Kathy Wagenknecht prepares to take the moderator's seat.

On the Stage

The opening question asked the candidates to **introduce themselves** by saying who they are, why they're running for office, and how they plan to get input from the community they hope to represent.

The first issue question concerned **school policy**. The candidates largely agreed on the need for a reform of the school funding mechanism, with local school boards and voters determining the needs of their schools and the legislature responsible for coming up with the funding. But they shared markedly different ideas on where local and state control should rest, cost containment strategies, and what a reformed funding process might look like.



State Representative candidates from BEN-5 district Jim Carroll, Michael Nigro, and Mary Morrissey

In the next question about **climate resilience**, there was a general consensus that climate change is both real and a threat. However, views diverged on the magnitude of the problem in Vermont, the relative importance of reducing dependence on fossil fuels versus the costs of transitioning, and especially whether the controversial Affordable Heat Act (Act 18) is or is not a constructive step forward on climate resilience.



State Representative candidates from BEN-2 district Anthony Cook, Will Greer, and Tim Corcoran

In the third question about the **housing crisis**, the responses generated a pool of ideas, several already underway through legislative action and others posed as possible solutions down the road. Candidates spoke of stressors on unhoused and low-income community members, businesses seeking to recruit employees with little housing to offer in a squeezed rental and real estate market, and a potential workforce unable to accept jobs in Vermont because of the housing crisis.



State Senate candidates from Bennington County Rob Plunkett, Seth Bongartz, and Cynthia Browning

Across the evening, high and unpredictable taxes popped up in responses to all the issue questions, and the complexities facing legislators were apparent. As one candidate remarked, “If solutions were easy, they would already have been done.”



State Senate candidates from Bennington County Steve Berry, Spike Whitmire, and Joe Gervais

The closing AAUW question about **the future** asked the candidates to imagine how, if at some indeterminate time they were to look back on their tenure in the legislature, they would know if they had been successful. Each of them said some version of “making life better” for their communities. Several candidates responded in terms of specific pieces of legislation enacted. Yet most said that they would judge their success by feedback from constituents and their own children as to whether their legislative priorities and work had made a difference.

With time left for only one audience question, AAUW member Judy Murphy asked for a simple response: “Do you support a woman’s right to choose, yes or no, and do you support LGBTQ rights, yes or no.” This question prompted the most succinct and sharply delineated responses, with the exceptions of several candidates who felt the need to establish context before delivering a (sometimes difficult to discern) “yes” or “no” answer.



AAUW member Judy Murphy gets the last question.

The Forum was followed by a buffet of refreshments and drinks, with mingling among the audience and candidates, overheard comments from the participants about the well-organized and thoughtful event, and a sigh of relief from the AAUW team who planned the event.

For the review that ran the next day in the *Bennington Banner*, click [here](#).

Behind the Scenes: It Takes a Village

Back in August, an ad hoc planning team--Suzanne Kirkpatrick, Judy Murphy, Dawn Rodrigues, Kathy Wagenknecht, and I--began a series of meetings. Immediately, we had to tackle the two thorniest decisions before us.

First, should we invite all 12 candidates (we did), and will there be enough time for the audience to get to know them, separate from the ins and outs of legislative details? To that end, we started drafting the open-ended introductory and closing questions.

And second, what are the priority issues in our community that we should ask them to address? Judy, Dawn, and I fanned out into the community to ascertain the top-of-mind issues of Bennington voters. Three priorities quickly rose to the top: education, housing, and climate resilience. The three of us then took the first pass at boiling down the issues and formulating questions that would provide necessary context for the audience and give the candidates a chance to respond as specifically or generally as they saw fit. Moderator, wordsmith, and strategist Kathy Wagenknecht stepped in to polish our drafts and make the questions her own. Toward the end, hospitality chair Mary Ellen Munley joined the planning team to work out the details of the refreshments.

Judy tackled the logistics of reserving the venue and arranging the room setup, lining up CAT-TV and drafting the press release. Dawn took charge of inviting the candidates and disseminating the press release, creating the flyer, and producing the large poster, set up on an easel, identifying AAUW Bennington as the evening's presenter. I helped edit all of our documents and penned the article for our newsletter and the follow-up article you're reading now.

Others stepped in to help. Gudrun Hutchins dived into the archives to discover that our first Candidate Forum was in 2004, 20 years ago, and produced the tabletop name cards for the candidates. Jennifer Kern, the "timer" since our first Candidate Forum, partnered with Mary Elizabeth Groupé to flash yellow and red cards so the speakers knew when their allotted time was running out or used up. And the refreshments buffet was graciously designed by Mary Ellen with additional contributions of sweets and cider from Jane Burkhardt and Althea Church.

Okay, with another sigh of relief, it's a wrap! Sometimes it takes a village. I'm so proud of ours.