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## Carson Wants Voters to Feel Connected

By Barry Bridges



Lauren Carson is convinced that the time is right to make her mark in politics.

Having mounted a challenge to Democratic incumbent Peter F. Martin for Rhode Island's House District 75 seat, Carson sat down with *Newport This Week* to discuss her campaign. "I've really always wanted to run for office," she said. "I have a knack for public policy, I have a good base in Newport, and it seems like the time is right to take the next step in my public life."

The 60-year-old Carson holds both an M.B.A. and Masters in History from the University of Rhode Island, is a former small business owner, and currently works on policy and membership development for R.I. Clean Water Action. Active as a community volunteer in numerous organizations, she has served on the Newport Energy and Environment Commission, the 2014 Charter Review Commission, and currently sits on the board of the Environment Council of Rhode Island. She has also dedicated time to the Alliance for a Livable Newport and is a past-president of the Norman Bird Sanctuary.

The campaign to unseat Martin has been a satisfying experience for the gregarious and indefatigable Carson. With a grassroots house-to-house campaign a hallmark of her efforts, she estimates that she has knocked on over 1,000 doors.

"I love it," she stated. "I started in June and some voters have expressed some surprise in seeing me, because candidates don't really go door-to-door anymore. But contact is key. Constituents want to be connected to their legislators."

Reflective of her approach to the campaign, she said, "I will bring a lot of enthusiasm and energy to the office. I am proactive and will offer a strong relationship with voters."

Carson declined to offer a critique of the incumbent and wanted to focus instead on what she brings to the table. But when asked whether a freshman representative would lose the advantage of having a three-term incumbent who may have established a rapport with House leadership, Carson said, "I don't think it's a risk to our local voters. I do deliver and I will be active."

She continued, "One of the themes I have seen out there is a feeling of disenfranchisement, which has arisen from some of the City Council's recent actions, as well as decisions made at the State House. Voters feel out of sync with their policymakers. They want to be more closely connected and want to know their elected leaders personally."

Carson is disappointed that her opponent declined a debate invitation from the League of Women Voters, but feels that "it's not too late" for Martin to agree to get together for a public discussion of the issues.

Regarding her political philosophy, Carson points to her recent experience on the Charter Review Commission in saying that "my point of view is not always going to win. But my plan is really to stay as close to the community as possible and to stay connected. Politics is all about negotiation and compromise, and I will do my best to represent the district and advocate for its best interests."

If elected, she said that she would initially meet with City Council to see what Newport needs out of the legislative session.

She would also take a look at the dynamics of the tourism industry and how it affects the city. “In its recent report to the council, the Finance Review Committee had questions about revenues versus the costs to Newport, such as the impact on infrastructure and providing police services. That is worth a closer look,” she said.

As far as creating more jobs in the area, Carson pointed to the proposed North End innovation hub and said, “I am gathering more information about what city leadership is planning so that I can be the best advocate. I would also engage with groups that have undertaken detailed analyses of our local economy. Newport is a very unique community, and the seasonal, marine, and defense sectors will continue to be our anchors going forward. But I also want to focus on bringing in new service industries.”

Carson added, “I am also very concerned about storm surges and flooding. It’s not just an environmental issue, but an economic one as well. We need to advocate for more resiliency efforts in Newport. There is a lot at stake when we talk about flood insurance and historic homes. We need to be more aggressive with this; problems are often tied to infrastructure spending. I feel uniquely positioned to stay on top of these issues.”

With Newport’s electorate eyeing a casino referendum in November, Carson is against bringing table games to Newport Grand. “I am opposed on an individual level simply because I voted against the measure two years ago and question why it has come back. On a more academic level, my own research has convinced me that it’s not right for us. Is this the type of tourist destination we want to be? We need to be more strategic in thinking about tourism as one of our anchor businesses.”

Carson wrapped up her comments by emphasizing her theme of staying as close to the community as possible. “I encourage voters to learn about the issues and to get out and cast their vote on primary day.”

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