

OUR VIEW: ELECTION 2014

City needs a new voice in R.I. House

If Rhode Island is going to change for the better, that change needs to start with the legislature.

Voters in Tuesday's Democratic primary for Newport's House District 75 have the opportunity to effect such change, by voting for newcomer Lauren Carson.

Carson, 60, is a first-time candidate, but she has a breadth of experience in a variety of areas, from running small businesses, including her own bed-and-breakfast inn in Newport, to activism and advocacy on a variety of issues related to energy and the environment. She is comfortable both in Newport and at the Statehouse, and sees the importance of interconnectedness between the city and the state on many levels.

A community organizer for Clean Water Action, Carson has served on the Newport Energy and Environment Commission for the past three years and has been instrumental in extending the recycling program begun at the Newport folk and jazz festivals more than 20 years ago to other major public events in the city.

That, she said, not only makes the city more sustainable, but also more attractive to sponsors of large-scale events that support Newport's tourism-dependent economy.

In fact, she said she sees "the environmental issue as an economic issue."

Carson would like to expand that approach to examining ways to grow Newport's tourism economy without, as she puts it, the "short-term fix" of casino gambling. She opposes adding table games to Newport Grand to make the video-slot parlor a full-fledged casino, despite the pledge of prospective developers to invest \$40 million to turn the hulking former jai alai fronton into a Monte Carlo-style entertainment center.

Rep. Peter F. Martin, the Democratic incumbent in House District 75, which represents the southern portion of the city, also says he opposes casino gambling. However, Martin was the co-sponsor of legislation that ultimately took away Newporters' ability to vote on a

local ballot question on Nov. 4. Instead, as urged by House leadership, the legislation requires only a statewide ballot question on the casino proposal.

The question still will have to pass statewide and in Newport to be approved, but the local ballot question — referred to specifically in the state constitution — historically had been seen as another hurdle for any expansion of gambling.

Asked if he felt the move disenfranchised Newport's voters — 249 more of whom cast votes on the local ballot in 2012, when the table games question was on both ballots — Martin said he did not. "The question is the same question," he told the editorial board of The Daily News during a meeting last week. "There is no need to have a local question."

Many voters, however, feel differently. Adding to the insult of having a casino question on the ballot again just two years after it was soundly defeated in Newport, legislators have taken away the city's local vote. Even worse, that injury was caused — or at least allowed — by our own local legislators.

That kind of action speaks more to Martin's loyalty to House leadership than to his constituents, although he prides himself on constituent service and "working full-time at a part-time job."

Martin, 73, has been in the General Assembly for three terms, yet cites as his top accomplishments the pardoning of John Gordon and securing five crosswalks for America's Cup Avenue. While the former is a nice novelty and the latter is important for public safety in downtown Newport, the city deserves more from its representatives.

We are disappointed that voters in House District 75 will not have an option in the Nov. 4 general election — and by the fact there only are four contested races among the 11 legislative districts that represent Newport County — but of the decision before voters in Tuesday's primary, we think Lauren Carson is the better choice.

READERS' LETTERS

Casino ballot controversy shows folly of last-minute legislating

The midnight machinations of the Rhode Island legislature that changed the casino ballot questions smacks of insider dealing and backroom politics.

ELECTION 2014: CASINO QUESTION The final amended version of House bill HR294 (related to the approval of table games at Newport Grand) resulted in a change that calls for having a single statewide vote on the casino ballot question instead of one question statewide and one for Newport. And these final amendments to HR294 were made so late in the day that Newporters had no opportunity to comment on them.

After the legislation passed in this late-night session, the change was mentioned in the press but was not covered extensively. The Newport City Council was not officially notified of these changes in the ballots. The Newport Canvassing Authority was not notified of the change until Aug. 21, when the secretary of state's office called to say the Newport ballot could not be certified because it contained both the local and state casino question.

The League of Women Voters believes that governmental bodies must protect the citizens' right to know by giving adequate notice of proposed changes, holding open meetings and making public records accessible.

This late-night legislating does not serve citizens well nor does it serve the legislative process in the state.

Transparency in the legislative process is essential. This change in the casino referendum question was neither transparent nor informative.

Sen. Leonidas Raptakis, D-Coventry, one of two who voted against the legislation, explained his "no" vote, saying: "To read a 15-page bill at 2:30 in the morning is ... a dangerous precedent. That's why I can't support the bill."

We agree. Too many late-night or rushed deals, like 38 Studios, have cost Rhode Island voters dearly.

Our elected representatives bear the responsibility to understand legislation that is passed and to account for their votes, especially when they sponsor the legislation. This late-night legislating does not serve citizens well nor does it serve the legislative process in the state.

We urge Newport County citizens to contact their representatives and express outrage at this broken system.

Susan Wells, Newport,
president of the League
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