

Interviews with County Executive Candidates

Wednesday, June 19, 2024

Westport Town Hall

Detailed Responses

Dana Pellebon has lived in the area for all of her adult life. She spent about 20 years doing housing work including managing 6,000 to 7,000 housing units and then being marketing director for the company. She was the director of housing at Porchlight. She is now Executive Director of the Rape Crisis Center. There she expanded the center from advocacy to also doing case management and providing services. She also has run several businesses including the Frequency (bar/music venue) and local theater.

Q1: What is your vision for rural and urban towns in Dane County over the next 20 years?

A1: My vision is that we are all having conversations. I want to make sure we have adequate land to make sure we can address things like flooding. The next 20 years looks like all of us working together on overarching goals. That is how I have managed through a variety of organizations. Let's talk through the things that are working well and the things that aren't. Preserving farmland and sustainable growth are important. (One thing we did not do well is that we put a great number of people with a variety of different issues in housing (referring to the Housing First initiative). We didn't make sure the services that we needed to support people were in place. We left that to the housing managers but that is not their job. We saw three large projects fail because we did not coordinate what was needed to move forward. Overall, we need to make sure we have the systems in place to support the decision we are making.

Q2: What are your concerns about how the tax burden impacts town residents with fixed incomes?

What are your goals for the total County debt?

A2: Before I left the County Board in April, I talked to the Controller (Hicklin). We discussed our taxes going up and what Dane County isn't doing. We don't have a Capital Improvement Plan. We need to reserve funds to pay for repairs. We have not had a Capital Improvement Plan in over a decade. We need to think about how much debt we have coming off and how much room do we have for new debt so that we don't increase our taxes. That is how I am going to manage the debt in the long term.

Q3: What is your position on the County purchasing land and taking it off the tax rolls? Would you support Dane County providing financial payments to local municipalities, similar to payments-in-lieu that the state provides to compensate municipalities and other local taxing jurisdictions since land owned by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is exempt from property tax?

A3: When the county takes land it impacts the ability to make taxes off the that. We need to purchase marsh land to protect some business and homes from flooding. I don't know how much more I will do with parks right away because I think there are other things that are important.

We have spent the last 4 years using funding (referring to federal funding) that isn't coming back. It has to make financial sense. I will ask: what are the risks, what are the rewards, what are the impacts.

I don't know about compensating the local taxing jurisdiction. There are many programs that are funded through the County. I can't answer the last part of that question. We don't know the budget and what needs to happen across every part of the county and across programs.

Regina Vidaver serves on the Madison Common Council and works for the Department of Health. She has been an executive in the past and is ready to bring those executive management skills to Dane County. She noted her experience in health services and that health and human services are the biggest part of the county budget.

Q1: What is your vision for rural and urban towns in Dane County over the next 20 years?

A1: Dane County is a unique area. You can go from an urban area to a farm. This is unique and worthy of protection. I think about moderate growth. We want the majority of development in areas with transportation and services and smaller growth in towns. Broadband is a critical piece. We need to make sure everyone has access to it (similar to electricity). We also need transportation (she mentioned Amtrak) and to make sure roads and bridges are maintained. Efforts to preserve our waterways and manure digesters were mentioned. Also the issue of first responders and how it is getting harder and harder to find volunteers to do that work was mentioned.

We need to think about how to keep costs down and shared opportunities. CARES (Community Alternative Response Emergency Services) program to bring behavioral health specialists to situation instead of police was mentioned as a worthwhile investment. We need to think about keeping our communities connected. Loneliness and isolation is an issue and can be more so in rural areas. We need to facilitate opportunities to connect people (like the Town of Dunn potluck).

Q2: What are your concerns about how the tax burden impacts town residents with fixed incomes?

What are your goals for the total County debt?

A2: What is the value of my tax investment? People need to feel like they are getting value from what the county is investing in. I support the county engagement project being conducted to get feedback across the county. We need a capital improvement plan. That needs to be a high priority. It is critical to see what expenses are coming, what do we need to think about, what do we need to push off. Without that plan we don't know where we are going. Dane County Supervisors are already working on a Capital Improvement Plan. We want to maintain the debt service under 15%. That is where it is now and it shouldn't go over that.

The Madison Public Market and Fitchburg Teen Center are fantastic and need to be planned for. It is critical to promote tourism because we have a sales tax on tourism. We need to advocate for communities to have a sales tax. We need to make sure that we close the dark store loop hole. We need to advocate for a regional transit authority. Transparency is important. We need to publicize programs for people that are already in place to help people on fixed incomes. We need to manage the debt service. 12% of budget is the debt

Q3: What is your position on the County purchasing land and taking it off the tax rolls? Would you support Dane County providing financial payments to local municipalities, similar to payments-in-lieu that the state provides to compensate municipalities and other local taxing jurisdictions since land owned by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is exempt from property tax?

A3: We need to work with municipalities. "Nothing about us without us." Land purchases should be for a clear community purpose. Think about that very cautiously and think about the total burden to everyone. I would be open to consider it and see what it would look like and recognize that it (Dane County buying land) takes it off of school, local municipal and other taxes.

Wes Sparkman has worked for Dane County for 26 years and lived in the area since he was 17 years old. He attended UW Madison for college and grad school. He is a graduate of the LaFollette School of Public Affairs and in 2023 received their Alumni of Distinction Award.

Q1: What is your vision for rural and urban towns in Dane County over the next 20 years?

A1: My position will always be to listen to what you have to say and then help lead the way for things we all agree on. My overall vision is for everyone to have an opportunity to grow and thrive. Sustainable development, sustainable ag, reduce carbon footprint, business development and business creation were mentioned. I am currently a Dane County Dept head. I worked for Kathleen Falk and Joe Parisi on 7 successful budgets (passed with minimal conflict or uncontested). I understand the county budget process.

I developed the Madison Regional Economic Conference. As the fastest growing county in Wisconsin, how do we manage that? Economic growth is a huge part. We need infrastructure development/improvements. We need to invest in roads, broadband, fostering community, preservation of natural and cultural heritage through conservation efforts and tourism. We need to sustain the arts.

Q2: What are your concerns about how the tax burden impacts town residents with fixed incomes? What are your goals for the total County debt?

A2: Goals would be property tax relief programs in partnership with federal aid for seniors and fixed income financial assistance programs. Doing this would need an educational component because people don't know what resources are available. We need efficient programs to minimize the need for tax increases.

Regarding total debt, human services is the largest piece of the county budget. The budget is sprawling, we need efficient government. I would look for ways to eliminate red tape as much as possible, reduce redundancy, those are things it is time for us to think about and consider. I worked with Supervisor Carousel Bayrd on a Fines and Fees Committee that save thousands of dollars and noted that fines and fees were getting out of control. I loved being on the fines and fees committee. The government saved some money. (Note: Fines and Fees was a subcommittee of the Dane County Public Protection and Judiciary (PP&J) Committee created in 2020. It reviewed fines and fees assessed in the civil, human services, and criminal justice systems to determine how Dane County can reduce or eliminate these

fees, fines, and costs. It included an analysis of the financial hardship and justice hardship placed on African American individuals, individuals of color, and low income individuals and their families because of fees.)

Q3: What is your position on the County purchasing land and taking it off the tax rolls? Would you support Dane County providing financial payments to local municipalities, similar to payments-in-lieu that the state provides to compensate municipalities and other local taxing jurisdictions since land owned by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is exempt from property tax?

A3: It depends. If the land is for a public purpose, then taking it off the tax roles may be justified. Any decision to purchase land should be made with the community. I would look at the pros and cons. Pros: help compensate local municipalities, provision of essential services, foster relationships. Cons: significant financial burden, maybe disputes over amount. This is similar to an eminent domine situation taking land near the Beltline for a senior facility.

Melissa Agard was born and raised here. She is a single mom with four sons, who are the motivation for her work. She grew up on food stamps and pubic assistance. She stood in a different line to get lunch than other kids. She wants to continue to live in this area and make the world more fair and just. Her brother and sister are brown skinned and she saw injustices. She served two terms on the county board. She served in the Assembly eight years, now serves in the State Senate.

Q1: What is your vision for rural and urban towns in Dane County over the next 20 years?

A1: We need a true partnership with our rural areas. Our towns and farms and villages are economic engines. Whether is it land purchases, housing needs, emergency services, they will grow and I know that we can get this done. My goal and vision is to make sure that I and my staff are resources. You all are the bosses of the elected officials and the people that work at the county. It is about navigating systems.

Q2: What are your concerns about how the tax burden impacts town residents with fixed incomes? What are your goals for the total County debt?

A2: Now is not the time for a wish list. We need to keep things tight. So many communities are going to referendum for operating funds. The State shared revenue formula is getting fixed. We need to mitigate tax burden and make sure the state is doing its fair share. I need partners in the community to join me for that. How it is that we ensure that we are protecting our ag land and people see that as an investment in our economy? We have a lot of investment in infrastructure (with federal funds). We need to be aware of the borrowing costs and we need to avoid that and cliff that could be coming.

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A3: Interested in studying and understand what this would look like, that said there are funding limits. This is something that the state could help with to ensure that you have the tools that you need to be successful. We can do a better job that people are using the parks and spending money in your community. Tourism investing and see an increase in the tax base – we should be having those

conversations. Innovation fund – are there ways to pull additional resources from that. Having a strong ally in the County ex office with help bring in funding. Interested in studying this but there needs to be a balance.

We need to be transparent about purchases. We need to provide answers.