

ELECTION **2008** PREVIEW

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STATE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES: DISTRICT 52

State candidates offer clear differences

By Edward Freundl
Staff Writer

Democratic incumbent State Rep. Pam Byrnes is facing a challenge for her 52nd District seat in the Legislature from Republican Eric Lielbriedis of Saline and John Boyle of Ann Arbor, who is running on the Libertarian ticket.

The newspaper asked each candidate their specific stances on the following issues:

Stabilizing school funding

Byrnes: The Legislature has been trying to close the funding gap between schools districts by setting minimum and maximum funding levels, and by setting a basic funding level, which is the funding level it is hoped all schools will one day reach.

We have seen the playing field start to level itself over the years.

The foundation allowances still aren't equal (because of the initial

discrepancies between districts), but they are more equitable than they were over 10 years ago.

The current state of funding for public education is far from perfect.

It is, however, a large improvement from the pre-Proposal A days where discrepancies were much more glaring than they are today.

It is more than a decade since Proposal A has passed, and I believe that the time is fitting to revisit the issue.

Lielbriedis: In the short term, schools must deal with fewer students and less dollars – the obvious



Byrnes



Lielbriedis

answer is to privatize certain areas and to work hard in building efficiencies across the entire state.

The long-term solution is to lower taxes, attract business and

this additional funding by reducing overhead – not by increasing taxes.

To accomplish this, the state should provide incentives and establish a long-term goal to reduce the number of K-12 school districts from 553 to less than 100 (while maintaining the same number of schools); increasing the average number of students per district from 3,200 to more than 18,000; and reducing the school system's overhead costs by more than 60 percent.

Attracting high-tech business

Byrnes: I have made it my top priority to make sure that Michigan can compete globally by having an excellent work force and quality of life.

Thanks to the tax incentives offered to developing businesses looking to expand in Michigan,

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Washtenaw County has become a 21st-century economic engine that will help create good-paying jobs now and get our state back on track.

It is essential that we continue to invest in our public education system, so that high-tech companies can continue to see Washtenaw County as a new-age gold mine.

Michigan saw its first golden age during the boom of Detroit's auto industry, but thanks to the economic potential of these high-tech fields developing in our state, Washtenaw County will usher in a new, technology-driven golden age for Michigan.

Lielbriedis: A) Provide high-tech companies with tax abatements that are scaled with the overall payroll/quality and number of jobs on the payroll - we should incentivize companies to bring high-skill, high-paying jobs here.

B) More closely monitor direct spending of "incubators" that take state funds - we should retain an attorney, bookkeeper(s), and the like to assist small businesses and start-ups in getting their business on track at very low cost or free. One professional could make big differences in many businesses at relatively low overall cost.

C) Re-examine the unemployment insurance calculations, and limit the rate at which the taxable percentage can be increased in a single year.

D) Ensure that current Michigan companies come first. We need to retain and help those that are here. A perfect example of a flawed policy is the current Michigan Film Office incentives - which are subsidizing Hollywood.

Boyle: Michigan should cease and desist from pick-

ing winners and losers as the state attempts to attract badly needed jobs.

Just reducing the overall level of taxation and the amount of government intrusiveness would do vastly more to improve Michigan's economy.

Preserving farmland

Byrnes: I have been a member of the Washtenaw Land Trust, previously known as the Potawatomi Land Trust, for years.

I will continue to support the work of those who wish to preserve their land and leave a legacy of open space and natural areas for future generations to enjoy.

Lielbriedis: Developers are pushed out into greenfields for several reasons: height restrictions in developed areas simply prohibit increased density; complicated and changing zoning regulations can stretch permitting applications into years instead of days or weeks; even federal regulations deter from smaller two-story buildings.

We should welcome and incentivize development into cities instead of forcing them to look outside to farmland.

Boyle: I do not believe Michigan's Legislature should be involved in establishing laws, policies, programs, or procedures designed to preserve farmland from development.

I believe this should be the responsibility of local government (county, city, township) and should be managed with local zoning ordinances over the short term and local long-range land-use plans over the longer term.

Finding sources of revenue

Byrnes: I am in favor of eliminating redundancies and inefficiencies in state government when possible. In fact, I've even voted to support cutting my own salary and benefits.

However, I am not willing to sacrifice essential services such as public safety and education. The state govern-

ment is obligated to fund these services in order to ensure a basic quality of life for its citizens.

When available revenues fall short of being able to deliver these services, I am willing to look at both new revenue streams and public/private partnerships to fill the gap.

Lielbriedis: I disagree with the premise; companies all across Michigan force efficiency on themselves as a regular part of running their operations. They do more with less, every year, competition forces the savings and efficiencies.

Lansing has had few, if any, major reforms to speak of in several years. The services provided by the state are somehow measured in budget dollars instead of output or people served.

Real savings and efficiencies can be found in any over-managed organization.

Boyle: New sources of revenue for Michigan should only come from an expanding economy.

The state should be able to provide all essential services within its current budget. The following changes would expand the economy and significantly reduce costs:

Make Michigan a right-to-work state - while respecting the right of workers to organize and to join unions.

Rebuild Michigan's budget from the ground up; in which every function must justify every cost based upon satisfying a need.

Develop incentives to encourage the state's 1,242 townships and 533 cities (or incorporated villages) to consolidate.

Coordinate with local units of government to eliminate responsibilities that are (i) redundant offerings available from the state and/or the counties, (ii) not the province of government in the first place, or (iii) of marginal value to the taxpayers.

Breaking the gridlock

Byrnes: I think that we need to take a serious look at

the impact that term limits have had on the stability of the Legislature.

With a lack of institutional memory, and continuous power grabs by individuals who are always looking to their next move on the political ladder, it's not hard to see why people think that the Legislature lacks true leadership in times of crisis.

We need legislators who know that it's their job to represent their constituents by reaching across the aisle when necessary, instead of playing "gotcha" politics. I believe that I can improve the discourse in Lansing.

Lielbriedis: A) Focus in Lansing has been lost. MichiganVotes.com reports over 6,400 bills and amendments brought forth so far, yet not even 500 have been signed into law. How many of those bills focused on our single-state recession? How many of those bills fixed the system?

Legislators are focused on other things. I suggest that legislators and citizens all focus on the Michigan Recession and how to stop it.

B) The state needs complete transparency in its finances so that citizens can see where the money (our taxes) is being spent and properly evaluate the issues.

C) Let's consider the Michigan Fair Tax system. This removes all the embedded tax costs in products and services and places a consumption tax on the end user.

Boyle: I would attempt to break the gridlock in Lansing by working 100 percent for the voters and 0 percent for powerful interest groups.

I would fight tirelessly for balanced budgets without increased taxes, fight to shrink the size and intrusiveness of state government, never vote for an increase in the current rate of taxes - for the state as a whole, remain beholden to no one but the voters - and the voters' children and grandchildren.