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TOP STORY

Democrat, Republican seek to unseat Stefanik

Michael Goot
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Wilton resident Ezra Watson, a Democrat, and Republican Lonny Koons, of Catharge, are challenging U.S. Rep. Elise Stefanik, R-Schuylerville.

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Both a Democrat and a Republican have announced challenges to unseat U.S. Rep. Elise Stefanik — 18 months before the next election.

Wilton resident Ezra Watson has filed official paperwork with the Federal Election Commission. Lonny Koons, who lives in Carthage in Jefferson County, says he plans to seek the Republican nomination, but has not filed paperwork.

Stefanik, R-Schuylerville, is serving her fourth term representing the NY-21 Congressional District, which covers all of Warren, Washington, Clinton, Essex, Franklin, Fulton, Hamilton, Jefferson, Lewis and St. Lawrence counties and portions of Saratoga and Herkimer counties.

Looming over this run is redistricting, which is going to occur because New York will lose one congressional seat. Which seat is eliminated remains to be seen.

Ezra Watson

Watson said he is running for Congress because he believes that Stefanik has not been aggressive enough to combat climate change.

“We need to meet a goal of 50% carbon reduction by 2030 — less than 10 years. That’s very aggressive. In order to reach that, there really is no action too bold,” he said in a Zoom interview on Tuesday.

Watson said Stefanik does not support the Green New Deal. He supports a tax on carbon emissions in the range of \$200 per ton of emissions.

Watson suggested that one way to combat climate change is for farmers in the district to embrace sustainable farming practices. He would also like to see a big expansion of wind and solar energy through tax credits.

Watson said he also supports a universal basic income idea of the kind advocated by 2020 presidential candidate and current New York City mayoral hopeful Andrew Yang. Watson believes that the economy will shift more toward automation and some workers will need to learn new skills.

Guaranteeing a minimum income will help people in that transition, according to Watson.

Watson said he also wants to focus on the addiction crisis, which he believes has been exacerbated by the pandemic. He supports Medicare for All, which would cover in-patient rehabilitation.

He would like to see free college education for public higher education institutions.

Watson supports an increase in the corporate tax rate to generate some tax revenue for some of these priorities.

Watson, 45, currently works as a semiconductor equipment engineer at SUNY Polytechnic Institute. He is married with one child in kindergarten.

He said he was spurred to run for office after the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol and former President Donald Trump leaving office. He noted that the district did not support Trump as strongly in 2020 as in 2016, and Watson saw an opportunity for a progressive Democrat such as himself. However, he stressed he is a capitalist.

“I believe in the power of a free market, but I put people on top of the list, our well-being over profits,” he said.

Watson acknowledged it will be an uphill climb as Stefanik beat Democratic challenger Tedra Cobb 58% to 41% in November’s election.

Also, Stefanik has a large amount of cash on hand — \$2.5 million as of March 30.

He has raised some money, but not at the threshold where he has to file an FEC report.

Watson said he was not aware any other Democrats declaring as candidates for NY-21 at this point.

Lonny Koons

Koons said he is challenging Stefanik because he believes the politicians in Washington have lost touch with the average person.

People get elected to Congress with not much money and they are millionaires when they leave office, Koons said.

“We need people who are not looking out for themselves,” he said.

Koons served for 20 years in the U.S. Army infantry and relocated to the area about four years ago, after he retired from the military, because his wife has local ties.

He now drives semi-trucks for a living. He said he has been poor and had to decide what bills he had to pay.

Koons is one of two candidates featured on the website **bluecollarpolitics.net**. The group says “it is all about the average American, not the elitists or 1%’ers.”

Koons said he does not have any issue with Stefanik’s policy positions or her support of Trump.

However, he is running because he wants a stronger voice for the North Country and its 750,000 residents. The region needs more jobs, which have left in the last decade.

Koons said he believes the region should tap into the district’s resources, including its highway and rail network and ports of entry such as in Plattsburgh.

Koons said he is concerned about how the pandemic has decimated small businesses. He believes the shutdowns were too onerous.

He would support a system such as Medicare for All. He already uses a universal health care system through the Army. He said the government may have to step in and regulate drug prices.

On gun control, Koons said people may not need an AR-15 to go hunting, but they may need them if they have to stand up to tyranny in the country.

However, he said he does not have a problem with universal background checks and registration and the ability to restrict someone’s ability to possess firearms because of a psychological evaluation.

Koons supports legalization of marijuana at the federal level. He said states that legalized the drug saw increased tax revenue that helped improve their schools and roads.

The country needs to secure its borders, Koon said, adding that he believes that the citizenship process should be streamlined. Perhaps let people earn it through military or other volunteer service, he suggested.

“Make the process easier, less costly,” he said.

Koons also believes that the government should allow everyone who wants to go to college the opportunity to do so, regardless of their income level.

He would like to see a higher tax on corporations to pay for some of these priorities.

Koons, 43, is married with three children and two grandchildren.

The primary is on June 22.

Stefanik campaign response

Ali Pardo, spokesman for the Stefanik campaign, said that Koons is not a legal candidate and has not filed any paperwork with the FEC.

“Congresswoman Stefanik just handily won reelection with the largest number of votes ever for a North Country congressional candidate winning Republicans, independents and Democrats. She will continue to focus on delivering results to North Country veterans, seniors, small businesses, manufacturers, farmers and hardworking families,” she said in an email.

When asked about Watson’s candidacy, Pardo said: “a socialist will never represent the North Country.”

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