

On Your November Ballot: Centre County Leadership

In this issue, Operation Wildfire reviews County leadership positions and the candidates whose names appear on your November 7 ballot. Democratic candidates' names appear first because the Governor is a Democrat.

County Commissioner

The Board of Commissioners is the chief governing body of Centre County. The Commissioners are responsible for: appointing personnel; supervising County offices, programs and contracting; developing and adopting the annual budget; assessment of property, levying of taxes, and as necessary, the borrowing of funds for construction of capital projects; increasing economic development and monitoring the efficiency and effectiveness of County programs and services.

The Candidates

Mark Higgins (D) – Mark was elected Centre County Commissioner in 2015 and is running for re-election. He is the current Chairman of the County Board of Commissioners. Prior to his election, Higgins worked for 30 years as a turnaround specialist in industry and, over that time, has saved and created hundreds of jobs at seven different businesses.¹

Amber Cistaro Concepcion (D) – Amber earned a graduate degree in government from Georgetown University. Amber served for 11 years on the School Board for the State College Area School District, most of that time as Board President. In this role, she helped the district achieve financial stability as well as plan and complete six large building projects to replace failing facilities. In January 2023, Amber was appointed to be a Centre County Commissioner to complete the term of Commissioner Michael Pipe, who accepted a position in the Shapiro Administration.²

Steven Dershem (R) – Steve owned and operated Dershem's Sport Center, a successful family-owned sporting goods business. First elected to serve in 2003, Steve brought decades of business experience to the Commissioner's office. During his time on the board, the County designed and rebuilt a modern County-wide 911 system, constructed a state-of-the-art emergency responder training site and developed mental health and substance abuse programs that have been modeled across the state. Steve is a graduate of Bellefonte Area High School and earned a Bachelor's Degree in Labor Studies at The Pennsylvania State University.³

Marie Librizzi (R) – Marie retired in December 2022 after 42 years of co-owning Old Main Frame Shop & Gallery. Her other entrepreneurial ventures include previous ownership of the Boalsburg Pump Station Cafe, Sadie's Gourmet Waffles and The Gathering Restaurant. She also previously served as president of the Downtown State College Improvement District. In addition to her business experience, Librizzi has served 14 years — and held several leadership positions — in the Coast Guard Auxiliary, the civilian arm of the U.S. Coast Guard. She is a member of the State College Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) and American Legion Post 245.⁴

Major issue in this race: The Responsible Contractor Ordinance (RCO) that requires 70% of the craft labor workforce on County projects "over \$250,000 be certified journeypersons, workers who have completed a state- or federally-approved apprenticeship training or those currently enrolled in such an apprenticeship program," per a StateCollege.com report. While the RCO doesn't specifically mention unions, many of those who spoke at the Centre County Board of Commissioners Meeting in support of the Ordinance were union representatives from across Pennsylvania.

¹ Friendsofmarkhiggins.com

² Amberconcepcion.com

³ Lockhaven.com

⁴ Lockhaven.com

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During the RCO discussion in June, Centre County Treasurer Colleen Kennedy stated, “One of our Commissioners has insinuated that his colleagues have accepted bribes to pass this ordinance, which is a disgraceful accusation to make.”⁵ TransparencyUSA reported that Commissioners Higgins and Concepcion received \$22,500 and \$13,500, respectively for their re-election campaigns from labor union political action committees from January 1, 2023 through June 5, 2023. TransparencyUSA does not report any additional labor union contributions to either Mr. Higgins or Ms. Concepcion since the RCO passed.

The Ordinance passed on June 27, 2023, along party lines, two votes to one. County Commission Chair Mark Higgins (D) and Commissioner Amber Concepcion (D) voted for the Ordinance, while Commissioner Steve Dershem (R) voted against it. Commissioner Dershem said he believes the ordinance was “rushed” and seemed to change based on whims. “It stifles competition,” Dershem told the *Philipsburg Journal*. “A lot of local businesses, we’ve had great success with their services, and we’ve had no problem with them, so I’m looking at this saying – ‘What are we trying to solve here?’” Candidate Marie Librizzi (R) opposes the RCO.

If you missed our issue paper on the RCO, visit our website (www.operationwildfire.org) and scroll down to “Responsible Contractor Ordinance.”

You can show your support of, or opposition to, the Responsible Contractor Ordinance with your vote on Tuesday, November 7.

At a recent forum⁶, each Commissioner candidate was asked, “What is your position on the Responsible Contractor Ordinance?” As expected, Commissioners Higgins and Concepcion reiterated their support of the Ordinance. Commissioner Dershem and Candidate Librizzi stated their opposition to the Ordinance, and indicated they would, if elected, rescind the RCO.

But what weren’t expected were the canned answers offered by Commissioners Higgins and Concepcion. Whether reciting statistics and studies (none of which were based on PA RCO experiences) or reading County statutes, this question made those Operation Wildfire members in attendance wonder if this question, and others, were leaked ahead of the forum?

Operation Wildfire also noted that some of the questions asked of Commissioner Candidates related to discussions with which only insiders would be familiar. This tactic differed from candidate forums of the past, in which these types of questions were not permitted.

Controller

The Controller’s office is responsible for the management and administration of the fiscal affairs of the County as set forth by the County Commissioners. It is one of five administrative offices in the County which function as service providers for other County departments. The office maintains the general ledger and processes accounts payable and payroll; prepares and distributes monthly financial statements to all departments and to the Board of Commissioners to assist them in managing the fiscal resources of the county; prepares and submits quarterly federal, state and local tax reports. The Controller is responsible for the internal audit function. The office also manages retirement benefits for all retirees and operates a Fraud Hotline.

The Candidates

Jason Moser (D) – Mr. Moser cites the following accomplishments as Centre County’s current Controller: Prevented over \$200,000 in attempts to defraud County resources; made County audit reports and Retirement Fund Investment Portfolio available online; advised County Commissioners on American Rescue Plan dollars; and, filed U.S. Treasury reports. Prior to serving as County Controller, Jason served as Jury Commissioner for Centre County and as Director of Banquet Operations at the Nittany Lion Inn. Jason received a B.A. in English

⁵ Centre County Treasurer Colleen Kennedy Facebook entry, June 27, 2023

⁶ League of Women Voters of Centre County Candidate Forum, October 24, 2023

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and a Graduate Certificate in Public Budgeting and Financial Management from The Pennsylvania State University.⁷

Trevor Stauffer (R) – A graduate of Bald Eagle Area High School and The Pennsylvania State University, Trevor served as a Centre County Deputy Sheriff for nearly 4 years and then began his career as a Police Officer at Penn State in 2017. Trevor also assists in day-to-day operations and budget reconciliation for his family's business, Valley Ace Hardware in Milesburg. Mr. Stauffer believes that a County Controller needs to have the utmost honesty and integrity, since they ensure the county is reaching honest and efficient management, as well as full accountability of County finances.

Major Issue in this race: There do not appear to be any major issues in this race.

Sheriff

Centre County Sheriff Bryan Sampsel (R) is running unopposed for re-election.

Treasurer

The Centre County Treasurer: receives and disperses money as directed by the Commissioners and the Controller; prepares bi-weekly checks and general expense checks; serves as the state agent for hunting, fishing and dog licenses, sportsman firearm permits, bingo and special raffle permits and small games of chance licenses; serves on the County Retirement Board; and, collects hotel room sales tax.

The Candidates

Colleen Kennedy (D) – Ms. Kennedy has been an accounting professional for almost 20 years. Among her accomplishments as Centre County's current Controller, she cites implementing online dog licensing and introducing credit card and eCheck payments. She facilitated moving the employees' retirement fund to a different institution, saving the County hundreds of thousands of dollars in annual fees. And as interest rates rose, she moved County investments into safe, higher-yield instruments, which increased interest earnings by nearly 600%. Ms. Kennedy earned a B.A. in Music and a Master of Education (M.Ed.) from UCLA; and, a certificate in Accounting from California State University, Los Angeles.⁸

Justin Behrens (R) – Mr. Behrens is an Iraq War veteran and former CEO of a successful nonprofit. As a result of his experience, he understands the complexity of managing budgets while also supporting public needs. His promise is to work tirelessly to be a good steward of taxpayers' hard-earned money, and to maximize the safety, legality and liquidity of County investments to help offset future tax contributions. Mr. Behrens intends to use his experience to improve County processes such as those used to secure dog and hunting licenses. Mr. Behrens earned an MSW in Social Work from Temple University.⁹

Major Issues: There have been some allegations and questions in the community about the potential of "bounced checks," that Ms. Kennedy did not complete audit reports on time, failed to file her campaign finance reports on time and exhibits general incompetence. View some of the accusations and Ms. Kennedy's responses at this link: <https://www.facebook.com/BehrensforCentreCountyPA/>

From the other side, endorsement Letters to the Editor of various newspapers to political action committee endorsements can be found on the Facebook pages of Ms. Kennedy and the Centre County Democratic Committee. On October 21, an Opinion piece in *The Express* questioned Mr. Behrens' qualifications for the position, citing lack of time in the County and his attempts to run for several political offices.¹⁰

⁷ FriendsOfJasonMoser.com

⁸ Centre County Treasurer Colleen Kennedy Facebook page; Centre County PA Election 2023 Voter's Guide

⁹ Centre County PA Election 2023 Voter's Guide

¹⁰ Centre County Treasurer Colleen Kennedy Facebook page

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Prothonotary

Centre County Prothonotary Jeremy Breon (D) is running unopposed for re-election.

Recorder of Deeds

The Centre County Recorder of Deeds: records, protects, preserves and reproduces legal documents that relate to real estate in Centre County; acts as a collection agent for the Real Estate Transfer Tax; acts as an agent of the State Department of Revenue in the collection of Pennsylvania State Writ Taxes; collects and distributes a fee provided by State Statute for the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts; collects fees from documents recorded for the Affordable Housing or First Time Home Buyer's Fund; County Records Improvement Funds; Pennsylvania Department of State Notary Public Commission Fees; and, records Veterans Military Discharge documents.

The Candidates

Robert Zeigler (D) – Mr. Zeigler has served on the Millheim Borough Council since 2018. Mr. Zeigler has over 20 years of experience as a trainer or a manager in the retail and food service industries. “Just as I have worked to get Millheim moving forward and being a leader in the county regarding broadband access, developing solar energy, and supporting working families, I pledge to do the same in Centre County Government, said Mr. Zeigler.” He earned a Master's Degree in Business Administration and Public Administration from the University of Phoenix, and earned a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science, with a minor in History, from The Pennsylvania State University.¹¹

Joseph Davidson – First elected in 1999, Davidson's notable accomplishments as Centre County's current Recorder of Deeds include imaging and re-indexing all documents dating back to the start of the County, developing one of Pennsylvania's first ever web-based public access systems, implementing electronic recording of documents, redacting sensitive and personal information from public documents and becoming the first Centre County Row Office to accept credit cards as a form of payment. Under Mr. Davidson's leadership, the Centre County Recorder of Deeds Office is widely regarded as one of the top in the state in terms of technological advancement and recording efficiency. A graduate of State College Area High School, Mr. Davidson continued his education at the Pennsylvania State University, earning a degree in Business Administration.¹²

Major Issue: There do not appear to be any major issues in this race. It should, however, be noted that Mr. Zeigler, at times, presents himself as the incumbent. For example, a Zeigler Facebook post on September 25 reads, “In the Recorder of Deeds office, he is committed to modernizing and streamlining processes.” His yard sign reads “Zeigler Recorder of Deeds.” Mr. Zeigler is the challenger, not the incumbent.

Register of Wills

Christine Millinder (R) is running unopposed for re-election.

Coroner

Scott Sayers (D) is running unopposed for re-election.

Operation Wildfire hopes that you've applied for an Election Day insurance policy, your mail-in ballot. If you haven't, there's still time! Show your family, friends, neighbors and coworkers that you value your right to vote. If you haven't already done so, apply for a mail-in ballot today, and encourage others to do the same ... just in case. Please remember to vote on Tuesday, November 7!

¹¹ ZeiglerforPA.com

¹² <https://www.facebook.com/ThoseWhoKnowVoteforJoe/>