



2018 Voters' Guide: State House Candidates for 143rd

Welcome to the League of Women Voters of Norwalk (LWV-N) Voters' Guide! The LWV is a national, non-partisan organization that believes an educated voter is a motivated voter. Each year, local leagues throughout the state put together guides to help voters understand where their candidates stand on the issues that impact their city or town. The League solicits information from the candidates by asking them questions that can be answered by all candidates, regardless of their party affiliation. The answers come directly from the candidates and are printed unedited by local leagues.

As candidates may cover more than one municipality – as in this case – answers from the candidates may be shared between leagues in other towns that the candidate represents. We thank the LWV of Westport for collecting responses from these candidates (with the exception of the ECS question that was added by LWV-Norwalk).

Here are the unedited responses from the two candidates for 143rd, in alphabetical order:

Candidate Gail Lavielle (R)

LWV: What are your ideas on how to increase Norwalk's share of Educational Cost Sharing (ECS) funding?

GL: It's widely recognized locally that Norwalk receives ECS funding that's inequitable because its property values are high compared to those of other towns with similar levels of household income and student need. This makes Norwalk's ability to pay for education appear greater than it is, and the ECS formula allocates less to Norwalk than to the towns it most resembles.

A critical issue for Norwalk is that the ECS formula weights property values much more heavily than household income.

I've introduced three pieces of legislation revising the formula, including committee amendments to the state budget. I testified with all my Norwalk legislative colleagues before the legislature's ECS task force, and I led a citizen rally to Hartford to lobby for Norwalk's funding.

As Education Committee Ranking Member, I've continued to fight every year for Norwalk's ECS funding. These efforts contributed to the progress achieved last year in the bipartisan state budget. It established a revised ECS formula that will increase Norwalk's ECS funding by 40% over 10 years, reaching \$15.8 billion in 2028.

While this is progress, it's not nearly enough. Norwalk's ECS funding should be more in line with comparable cities like Danbury, which receives more than twice as much.

I believe we must significantly revise the formula to weight median income and student need more heavily. I will continue to fight for this. We must also aim to increase ECS funding overall. To do so, we must all make restoring Connecticut's financial health an urgent priority.

LWV: What specific measures would you propose to balance the state budget - please list up to three.

GL: Connecticut faces a deficit of about \$4.4 billion in the 2020-21 budget cycle, and \$6.4 billion in the following cycle. Structural changes to state government's ongoing operations are necessary: one-time spending cuts or revenues will have no lasting effect.

- Reforming state employee benefits, which cost 3x the national average as a percent of the budget, is key to stopping persistent deficits. Examples: replacing defined benefits with hybrid or defined contribution plans, raising the minimum retirement age, increasing active employees' share of pension contributions, eliminating overtime from base salary amounts used for pension calculations. This would require renegotiating the current contract, which must be on the table. Separately, the state's annual required contributions to the teachers' pension fund could possibly be lowered by redirecting lottery proceeds or monetizing state assets – proposals now under discussion.
- Exploring opportunities to privatize or outsource state functions to community nonprofits that would improve quality and cost-effectiveness.
- Reforming the state budget process to make spending subject to projected revenues. Currently, spending priorities are set before revenues are identified to pay for them.

LWV: What would you do to make Connecticut a more attractive state for new businesses to open in and for established companies to remain or move in?

GL:

- Regain business confidence by restoring Connecticut's financial health.
- Implement a focused, purposeful economic development policy based on attracting new businesses with favorable fiscal and operating conditions, rather than on one-time incentives that don't reduce overhead for the long term.
- Enact and sustain consistent tax and regulatory policy that allows businesses to make long-term plans without having to second-guess the future.
- Substantially improve alignment of study and training programs at colleges, universities, community colleges, and technical high schools with the recruitment needs (engineering, advanced manufacturing, etc.) of businesses operating in and interested in moving to Connecticut.

- Expedite permitting and registration processes and reduce payroll costs.
- Eliminate the estate tax, which affects family businesses particularly strongly.
- Restrain persistent legislative attempts to impose new, onerous mandates on businesses that constrain their ability to manage efficiently and control costs.
- Invest in transportation infrastructure. Improve the most heavily used systems like Metro-North, increase service at Bradley and Tweed airports, and optimize deep water ports.
- Actively communicate Connecticut's new, business-friendly economic development policies nationwide and aggressively recruit new businesses.

Candidate Stephanie Thomas (D)

LWV: What are your ideas on how to increase Norwalk's share of Educational Cost Sharing (ECS) funding?

ST: Although the new changes to the Educational Cost Sharing formula come closer to recognizing the challenges for cities such as Norwalk, additional changes will help improve parity across the district and the state.

The new formula applies only to public schools, but should be expanded to include other types of schools in Norwalk, such as Magnet Schools and Charter Schools. Bringing all schools in line will help ensure that all students receive equitable funding.

Despite the changes to the formula, there is still a challenge associated with how low-income students are defined and measured. The existing guidelines are out-of-sync with the real cost to educate students. Federal poverty standards such as eligibility for free or reduced lunch are subject to change and do not truly reflect a student's needs. Until a new measure is found, the formula will not accurately reflect true cost.

Re-evaluation of the formula should also occur on a regular basis to maintain Norwalk's fair share. For example, the special education population continues to grow and although included in the current formula, the data is shifting quickly enough to warrant constant evaluation. A regular assessment of extra aid opportunities, such as the bonus funding provided for regional districts, should also be explored regularly.

Lastly, the surest way to ensure that Norwalk's share is maintained or increased is to protect the monies allocated for the planned phase-in of the new formula over the next ten years.

LWV: What specific measures would you propose to balance the state budget - please list up to three.

ST: Balancing the budget is a problem that requires parties working together for the good of Connecticut. Solutions married with re-election plans and short-term time horizons will not work. There is not one easy answer to cut, tax, or grow out of Connecticut's budget problem.

Recoveries take years of progress. We need to put creative ideas on the table, give them fair consideration, and have the courage to implement innovative solutions.

One of these ideas is the Legacy Obligation Trust (LOT) model developed by a bi-partisan commission to help fund our pension liability. Through this model, state assets (i.e. vacant property and idle waterfront property sitting) would be transferred to an independently managed LOT to maximize its economic value.

We also need a comprehensive review of tax policy and existing loopholes and how tax increases or decreases will affect economic growth and the state's ability to pay for services the state provides.

To save money, we should explore consolidating services currently fragmented across individual towns into regions to maximize efficiency through economies of scale.

LWV: What would you do to make Connecticut a more attractive state for new businesses to open in and for established companies to remain or move in?

ST: Businesses are attracted to states where they can recruit top talent. Small and large businesses alike experience difficulty finding the talent they need. Training the workforce for today's -- and tomorrow's -- jobs starts with our schools. I will prioritize meeting this need for a trained workforce by exploring all ideas, from training and apprenticeship programs to strategies to make college more affordable, such as loan-forgiveness programs or tuition assistance linked to post-graduate residency.

Reliable transportation and well-maintained roads are integral to attracting businesses to an area where many commute via public transportation and highways. I support a Transportation Fund Lockbox to ensure that revenue collected for transportation will only be spent on transportation needs.

Creating a small business-friendly environment is one of the best ways to rebuild the middle class. I will support small business creation with programs that encourage entrepreneurship while easing many of the permitting and regulation hurdles that stymie these efforts. I will also encourage the creation and growth of green technologies to provide new energy sources and reduce energy costs.