

# Oconee County Observations

News and comments about developments in Oconee County, Georgia

THURSDAY, APRIL 11, 2024

## **Candidates At Conservatives Of Northeast Georgia Forum Challenge Republican Incumbents They Will Face On May, November Ballots \*\*\*Oconee Library Discussed At Length**

The Conservatives of Northeast Georgia didn't invite the incumbents to participate in their candidate forum last week, and even though none of the incumbents physically was in the room, their presence was much in evidence.

All of the speakers at the forum are challenging incumbents, and the speakers criticized the Board of Commissioners, the Board of Education, the Clerk of Superior Court, and the three incumbent legislators representing the county in the General Assembly in Atlanta.

All of the incumbents for those offices are Republicans, and several of those who spoke at the forum criticized very pointedly the local Republican Party as well.

Of the eight candidates who spoke at the Conservative candidate forum, five are running as Republicans, challenging Republican incumbents in the May 21 Republican Party Primary.

Three of the speakers qualified as Democrats, but none of the three had any kind words for the Democratic Party. And the Oconee County Democratic Party has made it clear it is not supporting them, either.

Suzannah Heimel, who is running unopposed for Post 1 on the Board of Commissioners in the May 21 Democratic Party Primary, was very clear about her motivation and tactic.

"We have Republicans in office who are spending money like crazy," she said. "Most of us are not happy with that."

"I'm running as a Democrat because it gives me some more time," she continued. "I'll be on the ballot in November. I don't have to be primaried in May. So that gives me more time to talk to you all and get in the paper and get the word out about what's actually happening."

### **Format Of Forum**

Heimel is program chair for the Conservatives of Northeast Georgia, and she said she made the decision not to invite the incumbents so that the eight challengers would have more time to speak.

Moderator Rebecca Billings gave each of the candidates five minutes for an introduction and then allowed time after all had spoken for questions from the audience. The group was meeting in the Oconee Chamber of Commerce basement meeting room on Nancy Drive in Watkinsville.

The April 4 meeting lasted 90 minutes, with the initial presentations taking up 50 minutes of that time. About 35 people were in attendance during most of the session.

The presentations of the candidates focused on a number of issues, including government transparency, gambling legislation, zoning, property records in the Courthouse, and the integrity of voting.

The single issues that came up several times in the individual presentations, and took up more than six minutes in the question and answer section, was the operation of the Oconee County Library.

Billings began the program by calling to the front of the room, one after the other, the three candidates for the Board of Commissioners.

She followed with the three candidates for the Board of Education, the candidate for Clerk of Superior Court, and the candidate running for representative of House District 121.

## Hendrix

Pam Hendrix, who is running for Board of Commissioners Chair in the May 21 Republican Primary, challenging incumbent John Daniell, was the first to speak.



Hendrix

Hendrix, a local attorney who has been active in the local Republican Party and who organized much of the slate of candidates who spoke at the Conservative Forum, said “I have some very specific reasons that I decided to seek this seat.”

“At this point, we have our full-time (Board of Commissioners) chair taking a salary of \$130,000 a year and we have our county administrator taking a salary of \$144,000 a year,” she said.

(The final payroll figures for the last fiscal year were \$126,107 for Chairman John Daniell and \$145,192 for County Administrator Justin Kirouac; the budgeted salaries for the current fiscal year are \$130,607 for Daniell and \$145,000 for Kirouac.)

Hendrix said she thinks it is no longer necessary for the chair to be full time and to be paid a full-time salary.

The second reason Hendrix said she was running is because “they never give any financial information at the (Board of Commission) meetings. That just strikes me as odd. I just don’t understand why we’re not being given that.” (The Board does get quarterly financial reports from Finance Director Melissa Braswell.)

Hendrix also said the county audits are [hard to find online](#).

“I want to pledge not to take a full-time salary as chairman of the Board of Commissioners,” Hendrix said, “and I want to pledge for financial transparency. I want a financial report at every monthly meeting, and I want to put it all online.”

## Heimel

Heimel, who, because she is unopposed on May 21, will be running as a Democrat on the Nov. 5 ballot against incumbent Republican Post 1 Commissioner Mark Thomas, said she was unhappy about taxes and about zoning in the county.



Heimel

“In the north part of the county they are absolutely rezoning like crazy,” she said. “Building all of these neighborhoods. Retail. Storage units. All of this. And I think the more people I’ve spoken to, they are saying, why are they doing this? This is not what we want.”

“So I feel it’s time for our Board of Commissioners, in addition to our Board of Education,” she said, “to start listening to us. We are not just some taxpayer fund that they can spend as they see fit. We are actually taxpayers in this county and we should have a say so.”

“And we should be able to say, hey no, we don’t want this to happen,” she said.

“And we should go to Board of Commissioners meetings and have our questions answered,” she said. “And we should send emails about library books. I’ve been involved in that too. And they should respond to us. And they should listen to us as a conservative county.”

“Why am I running as a Democrat?” Heimel asked. “Many of you have probably heard that, though I am a conservative. I’m going to mention that because I think it probably will come up.”

“I’m running as a Democrat, because I don’t identify as a Republican right now,” she said. “I don’t know that many of us do. Our community, I feel, is not operated like we expect it to be.”

Heimel complained about government spending and said the advantage she has in running in the Democratic Primary is that her name will be on the ballot in both May and November.

Heimel, who has been active in the local Republican Party, serving as a party Poll Watcher as recently as May of 2022, told the Oconee County Democrats at their party meeting in March that she was running as a “moderate Democrat.”

## Cruz

Victoria Cruz is running in the May 21 Republican Party Primary for Post 4 on the Board of Commissioners. Incumbent Republican Mark Saxon also is seeking the party nomination in that election.



Cruz

Cruz said she was not involved in politics until the 2020 elections. “It was politics as usual until then,” she said. “You vote for your candidate. You wait for the votes to come in. You watch and you go to bed at night because you can’t stay up for everything. Ok. It’s the morning. And it changed. It changed.”

“I wrote to a lot of the state people and asked what happened and nobody could say anything,” she continued. “I watched a lot of hearings. No answer was coming forward. Nobody was stepping up to actually look at what happened.”

“So I also went to the local clubs here,” Cruz said. “First the GOP. I went there and they wanted to move ahead. And that surprised me. That really surprised me. There was no support from the GOP there. In fact, they made you unwelcome if you questioned anything. And so I found out about this group.”

“You should understand that a lot of the people who are members of this group are refugees from our GOP,” she said. “Anymore I think we all feel that way. I don’t think we feel represented by the GOP.”

“Our elections are terrible. We need to leave the machines. We need to vote hand marked paper ballots,” she said. “We can’t trust these machines. We haven’t been able to elect our leaders for decades. I really have to say that. Decades. Our leaders are chosen by our leaders. And corporations that they are aligned with.”

Cruz said she wants to be on the Board of Commissioners because it appoints members of the county's Board of Elections and Registration, the Oconee County Library Board of Trustees, and other groups that are important in the county.

"There are a lot of issues in the library," she said.

## **Reifsteck**

Joyce Reifsteck is running for the Republican Party nomination for Post 1 on the Board of Education, a post currently held by Kim Argo, who is retiring. Post 1 is designated as the Chair of the Board.



Reifsteck

Incumbent Post 5 Board of Education member Michael Ransom also is seeking the Republican Party nomination for Post 1.

"Oconee County schools are great," Reifsteck said. "We have great teachers. We have parents that are really involved. We have hard working students that really excel."

The problem is with the Board of Education she said, relaying a story about concerns she had about "the excessive amount of testing" required of her son while he was in school.

"For 12 years, I was that mom at the School Board meeting," Reifsteck said, "And there were only like three of us. But we were there. Talking to a bunch of people with their heads down and never looked up and never made eye contact. And I was thinking, is it me? You know, what's wrong here? Why is this School Board so aloof?"

"I'm running for School Board," she said, "because, number 1, I want the highest possible transparency in the budget. It seems like the whole school budget is this fortress...You shouldn't have to be a detective or an attorney to see the budget and see what's in it."

"I will try to create a culture of caring instead of arrogance," she said of the Board. "I know those people are nice people. They are trying to do a good job."

"There has somehow developed a culture of this aloofness and the superiority and this arrogance that I think that we should change into caring," she said.

## Long

Sheri Ward Long is running as a Democrat for Post 4 on the Board of Education, though she made no mention of her party choice in her comments.



Long

Post 4 currently is held by Tim Burgess, who is stepping down. Three persons are seeking the Republican Party nomination for that spot: Adam Hammond, Andy Pippin, and Russell Toms.

“My biggest concerns here are what are the kids doing in the schools,” Long said. “They are on these computers. All day. They are looking. They get all of their work on the computers. There are no books in the classrooms. Everything is online on their Chromebooks.”

“They are able to pull up so many things that have nothing to do with school at all,” Long said. “We need to get back to some real, paper, books for these kids to be working with.”

“I would like to see a lot more hands-on things in the classroom,” Long said. “I’m also concerned about the long bus routes. I know we are short of bus drivers. We need to hire some new bus driver that like kids, that want to be with the kids, and enjoy their job.”

Long said the bus drivers are “not getting paid enough. They don’t want to be driving buses and they need to be paid more. So we really need to be looking into that.” In response to a question, she said she didn’t know what the current bus driver salary is, but said “I can tell you that at another time.” (The Board recently [increased the salaries for drivers.](#))

Long said she wants to reintroduce home economics “where they’re learning how to cook, even just clean a house” as well as wood shop, saying “kids probably would be interested in that if we did have it within the schools,” as well as car repair.

“This is the reason I wanted to run for the Board because I wanted to focus on the children, what they were doing in school, give better things for them to do, make sure the teachers were being heard at the Board of Education meeting,” Long said.

“And their parents were able to ask questions and get real answers, get real answers,” she added.

## Aleshire

Stephen Aleshire is running as a Republican for Post 5 on the Board of Education in the May 21 primary, as is Brock Toole.



Aleshire

The Post is vacant because current Post 1 Member Ransom is running for the Chair position. Katie Green has qualified as the sole Democratic candidate for Post 5.

Aleshire said at the recent Republican Party Candidate Forum that Ransom “confessed that when they have an issue, it is often referred through the current chairperson, and she interacts with the superintendent and then comes back and...says this is what they want to talk about.”

“He confessed this in a public forum,” Aleshire said, “where we don’t really have a direct line with the superintendent.”

At Board meetings, “You don’t really know if there is interaction with the details of what’s going on behind the scenes,” Aleshire said. “Do they really understand or are they even privileged to the finances of the schools?”

“Why am I specifically running?” Aleshire said. “I have a big interest in kids getting a good education.”

“We’re training children to always go to college,” he said. “Somebody’s got to be the electrician. Somebody’s got to be the plumber. And there is no shame in that. I kind of wish a lot of time I’d kind of done that kind of things. We don’t really offer that opportunity.” (He is a physician.)

## King

Laura King, who is running as a Democrat for Clerk of the Superior Court, said “The primary reason I’m running is because it has come to my attention, and I’ve verified that, the Clerk of Court’s Office is not keeping property records in a hard copy form since 2017.”



King

The incumbent Clerk of Superior Court, Angela Elder-Johnson, is running unopposed for the Republican Party nomination on May 21. King has no opposition on the Democratic Party Primary ballot.

“We are constantly warned about the dangers of the fragile electrical grid and the Internet being hacked or going down or something,” King said. “There goes your property records. They will be gone, perhaps, or compromised, or whatever.”

“It is great to have digital copies,” she said. “I can access them from home. But also digital copies can be changed. So if you have your hard copy you can compare it with that digital copy and make sure that signatures and everything are correct.”

King said she also believes “in transparent, responsive government. I believe that people ought to be treated fairly, equally. I think this is not really a big issue with the Clerk of Courts, but I think government budgets and spending are out of control.”

King teaches at Georgia State University, and she said “I’ve seen the young people over the span of 35 years. The standards are dropping. Precipitously. Every year. The curriculum has got to change. Something is not right. The curriculum is bad. We are crowding out the important things, the three Rs, with a social agenda.”

“I’m running as a Democrat,” she said. “I’m politically marooned. I’m disgruntled with the Republican Party. I really don’t see a difference. I don’t see the parties matter.”

“The parties are being ruled by the fringes,” she said. “They are crowding out sensible ideas. We need some practical government right now. I think it’s critical.”

## Grigsby

John Michael Grigsby is running for the Republican Party nomination for House District 121, currently held by Marcus Wiedower. Wiedower has qualified to run for re-election, and the winner of the contest will face Democrat Courtney Frisch, who is unopposed in the May 21 Democratic Party Primary.





Grigsby

Grigsby said he and Hendrix “both have been mentored” by former State House Representative and former Watkinsville Mayor Bob Smith “that we should have three things that we talk about that we want to get done if we run for politics.”

“My first item I want to address is increase of health care for everybody in Georgia,” Grigsby, a family nurse practitioner, said.

Grigsby said 60 counties in Georgia “do not have a primary care physician, 49 don’t have a pediatrician for the children, 53 of them do not have a mental health professional.”

“We have over 7,000 nurse practitioners in Georgia that are licensed but our hands are tied by government oversight,” he said. “So I would like to work toward increasing access to health care in Georgia.”

Grigsby said “18 percent of rural hospitals in Georgia are at risk of closing” and people seeking emergency care are going to be coming to Athens hospitals. “We are going to have to wait six to eight hours to be seen in emergencies,” he said.

Grigsby said his second item is “criminals that are taking advantage of our population by scamming us.” He said he wants to create “a task force to be put together to fight these criminals.”

“The third thing I want to do is term limits for politicians,” he said. “Some people get comfortable in their position up there and they just stop doing their job.”

### **Library Question**

One of the first questions after Grigsby spoke was “what is the challenge at the Oconee Library. What do you think the solutions are?”

“There is multiple challenges,” Heimel said. “Probably the largest challenge right now is the fact that our Board of Commissioner chair denies that we are members of the American Library Association.”

"We are under the Athens Regional Library System," she said. "We are all members of American Library Association. So they send guidance on how we shelve our books, the clubs that we have. The Prism Club comes directly from the American Library Association."

"They tell us who we buy our books from. Baker and Turner. We are required to purchase our books from Baker and Turner," she said. "They tell us where to shelve our books. Did I already say that? They tell us everything that we are supposed to do in our libraries."

She said that Daniell, Chair of the County Commission, says he does not have any control over this "because there is a voluntary library board that controls what's happening in our libraries. Yes, that may be true. I can tell our county gives the library \$500,000 this year alone plus...\$100,000 in kind. So we can control our library."

"Counties can pull out," she said. "They can say I'm not funding this library until you get this under control. Which means we don't want this material here. And if we insist on having it...we need to shelve it away from children. I think that is all that most people are saying."

### More On Library

"Everybody is trying to make the library issue about individual books and about age inappropriate material," Cruz said. "And yes, that is a problem. Children who are kindergarten, sixth grade, even up through high school, should not be given all of this information about gender confusion, gender identities, transing."



Cruz, King, Long Responding To Questions

"And in a lot of schools, they are also pushing this through the actual schools through the teachers."

"Why is mental health for our children so bad right now?" Cruz asked. "They are trying to say it is because we are not pandering to the gender identity, gender transitioning narrative. It is because people like us are preventing kids from getting the kind of care they need so that they will be accepted everywhere."

"Well I contest that," she said. "I contend that the whole questioning of one's sexual identity is a mental illness. And I think a lot of doctors agree with that. And that should be handled with counseling and psychotherapy. That can help a child."

“They are fueling that with these books that they put in and the teaching that they put in especially in the blue states but it is coming here. It is definitely in the blue cities.”

Cruz also said of the American Library Association that “The entire organization is into Marxism. They speak at socialist, communist party events. They put out that narrative.”

The American Library Association is an organization for professional librarians, and Daniell has said repeatedly that the county is not spending any money on the organization.

## **Zoning And Gambling**

“I’m beginning to question zoning because we pass this zoning and then somebody doesn’t want to abide by it,” Hendrix said in response to a question. “Most of, we know what our property is zoned, and that’s the rule. We stick with that.”



Aleshire, Cruz, King

“But then you have the developers that come in and they buy a piece of property fully intending to change the zoning,” she said. “So it almost becomes this, you can buy out of it. If you have enough money, you get the zoning change.”

Jeff Hood, Vice Chairman for Policy Initiatives with the county Republican Party, asked Grigsby “what are your feelings on gambling and benefitting the lottery fund just in general.”

“They are trying to sell this by saying we are going to put more money into the Hope (Scholarship Fund),” Grigsby said. “It doesn’t need more money. I am against online gambling. I’m against all kinds of gambling. I don’t think we need it.”

That response produced loud applause—the strongest response from the audience of the evening.

In the just completed 2024 General Assembly session, Wiedower was the sponsor in the House of Senate Bill 386, which would have authorized sports betting in the state.

He also was the House sponsor of Senate Resolution 579 proposing to amend the Georgia Constitution to authorize the Georgia General Assembly to pass a law for sports betting in the state.

Grigsby said he expects the legislature eventually to approve sports betting, though he would work to prevent that if he were elected.

## **Forum Update**

The Conservatives of Northeast Georgia forum was the second forum of the election season.

The Oconee County Republican Party held a [forum on March 25](#) for all county Republican candidates, including those challenging the incumbents.

The Democratic Party has announced a forum at 6 p.m. on April 18, at the Oconee Chamber of Commerce, 55 Nancy Drive, in Watkinsville, that will include Green, running for Post 5 on the Board of Education, Reginald Wade, running for Oconee County Sheriff, and federal and state legislative candidates.

Also on the program are incumbent Democratic District Attorney Deborah Gonzalez and Kalki Yalamanchili, seeking to run as an Independent in November for District Attorney.

**The Party did not invite Heimel, King, or Long.**

**Kathy Hurley, chair of the Oconee County Republican Party, sent out an email message on April 10 about the Democratic Forum saying that Gonzalez and Yalamanchili “are slated to appear” and “You can attend in person (please wear red if you do), or watch it on Zoom.”**

**She also wrote: “Also, please note that three of the candidates in Oconee County that qualified as Democrats, but are really Republicans, are not scheduled to participate (wonder why?).”**

The Republican Party will hold what it is calling a “Candidate Face-Off” between Wiedower and Grigsby at its April 22 meeting, which starts at 6 p.m. at the Piedmont Health Campus Lobby Meeting Room, 1305 Jennings Mill Road.

Wiedower and Grigsby were not included in the March Republican candidate forum.

## **School Board Forum**

Michael Prochaska, co-publisher of *The Oconee Enterprise*, and I will host a candidate forum for qualified Democratic and Republican School Board candidates from 6 to 8 p.m. on April 25 at the Community Center in Oconee Veterans Park, 3500 Hog Mountain Road.



Candidates will make short introductions, and then the floor will be open for citizens to pose their own questions.

Those asking a question will be asked to introduce themselves by name as a courtesy to the candidates.

Questions must be about Oconee County Schools or the Board of Education.

Candidates also will be given the opportunity to offer a short closing statements and place campaign literature at the rear of the room.

The meeting will be video recorded and made available for download for anyone who wishes to use it.

### **Video**

The video below is of the meeting of the Conservatives of Northeast Georgia.

A very slight break occurs as Heimel was introducing herself. The camera flashed an error message and crashed, but I was able to restart it very quickly.

Although at the end of the forum it was announced that the session would continue after a recess with a business meeting, it did not, as people engaged in conversation and no meeting was held.

**Hendrix began her comments at 4:08.**

**Heimel spoke at 10:59.**

**Cruz spoke at 16:34.**

**Reifsteck began her comments at 23:24.**

**Ward spoke at 30:02.**

**Aleshire made his comments at 35:45.**

**King spoke at 40:39.**

Grigsby spoke at 46:45

The question about the library is at 54:54 in the video.

Hood asked Grigsby about gambling legislation at 1:05:04.

Posted by [Lee Becker](#) at 5:15 PM 

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