

Voters' Guide 2020

Minnesota House District 11B



Nathan Nelson - Republican
(Incumbent)

How do you feel the state government is handling the Pandemic?: During the first few weeks of the pandemic, there was awareness and support for the shutdown, people understood why it was necessary, even if they were negatively impacted. Partisanship disappeared; Covid-19 was our common enemy. Now as the months have dragged on, it has unfortunately become a very partisan issue. The threats of Covid-19 are not over, however, we should no longer be in a state of emergency, we need to be in a management phase. Yet Governor Walz continues to keep his emergency powers, not allowing the legislature to do its job. Keeping the legislature out of the pandemic management process is not good leadership. Emergency powers were not meant to be used by a governor for months, they were meant to respond immediately to an emergency. We need the legislature to be part of the process moving forward.

What are your top priorities for the upcoming term?: Public safety is critical, not only as it relates to health but also to law enforcement. We can support our police, work towards justice, and hold those accountable for their violent crimes. We need to keep the conversations open and address these concerns civilly. We also need to focus on our state's budget. This pandemic has turned a sizable budget surplus into a multi-billion dollar budget deficit. We need to figure out what our state's true needs are and prioritize our spending to continue the programs we are obligated to fund. Many families have been financially devastated over the past few months, so now is not the time to raise taxes to fund state government. State government is going to need to tighten its belt much like everyone else has.

What do you feel are the biggest challenges facing our area and the state of Minnesota?: Locally, we need to find ways to keep and grow jobs. Not long ago the Walz administration announced it was planning to close two area correctional facilities. These are good paying jobs for our district that would create a void in our local economy. We need to ensure the opportunities are there for our residents to find a job and remain employed. The biggest challenge for the State of Minnesota will be eliminating our projected budget deficit next session, and we're going to need to use some common sense to make this shortfall disappear. Raising taxes should not be an option. Finally, we need to get back to working with each other rather than finding reasons to be mad at one another. There is so much division in our state, ranging from politics to race to illness. More people need to be listening and talking to one another rather than talking over each other. We have more in common with each other than we might think. Whether you are a Republican, Democrat, or something else, I pledge to work with you, for you, listen to your concerns, and try to solve your problems. I ask for your support on Election Day



Jack Frechette - DFL

How do you feel the state government is handling the Pandemic?: It's an appealing but ultimately futile exercise to play Monday morning quarterback, especially with something as complex as a pandemic. As I see it, the State Government based their decisions on well-respected science, and I will always support using science to guide our thinking. The fact that our community has been spared the widespread death and illness that has plagued other areas does not mean the State Government was wrong — it means we are very lucky. And so rather than talking about how difficult the summer was, I suggest we celebrate our good fortune, and work together to safely ease the burdens that still exist for our local economy.

What are your top priorities for the upcoming term?: As we speak, jobs in our community are being lost because of partisan stonewalling. The Willow River CIP, a program that has universal acclaim from everyone who has experience with it, is being shuttered because the obstructionist wing of the Republican Party refuses to pass a budget bill — one of the most critical responsibilities for State leaders. And while these jobs (over 100, in fact) are being lost, and the area loses a talented and caring workforce, and the tax base shrinks, and a taxpayer cost-saving program is thrown in the waste bin, those currently in leadership are unable or unwilling to boldly go to their own party and say “We’ve gone too far, and now families in my District are hurting.” Blindly walking the Party line has delivered us to this dangerous place, and we must remember that people, not Party, come first in our community.

What do you feel are the biggest challenges facing our area and the state of Minnesota?: The polarization we are seeing in our community has transcended politics and is now felt in our daily interactions. Neighbors are no longer cooperating. Certain family members are no longer invited to dinner. Businesses here in District 11B are being boycotted. Whatever happens next in Washington, the greatest challenge that our District must face is the effort to return to a sense of decency, of community, and of common purpose. For when our current president leaves office, be it next year or in four, our neighbors remain our neighbors, and we will need them. Dispelling the myths of our divisions and uniting under our common, rural Minnesota values is critical if we are ever going to advocate for ourselves as a District.

Minnesota Senate District 11



Jason Rarick - Republican
(Incumbent)

How do you feel the state government is handling the COVID-19 pandemic?: I believe that the State's handling of the COVID response has been good at times, and not so good at others. In the beginning, when not much was known, the response and message was pretty good. We all agreed that we needed to flatten the curve, and let our hospitals get prepared. Unfortunately, due to some poor modelling, we were trying to prepare for a much more severe situation than what was to come.

There has also been very confusing and contradictory information given to the public along the way. I think that what has been handled the worst though is how small businesses have been treated. Most were shut down, while large businesses were able to remain open, with no option to show that they could be open and operate just as safely as the large stores. Now I believe we have moved passed the emergency, and all Governors should end their emergency powers, and return to working with Legislatures to make decisions together as we move forward. Statewide plans and mandates do not work well, so we should bring in the ideas from elected officials from around the state so that we can make better plans for the entire state.

What are your top priorities for the coming term?: My priority for the coming session is going to be figuring out how to put together the State's budget for the next two years. We know that the shutdown has created a large deficit, now we have to figure out how we will be able to cut the State's spending, with the least impact on the services provided to Minnesotans. I am also hoping to be able to get a bill done next year that will reform the Conservation Improvement Program for our Electric Utilities companies, like East Central Energy. It is reform that has been being worked on for three years, and we were very close to getting it done this last year. Even though there have been other issues that have been getting so much more attention, I have continued to work on this as well, and believe the support is there to finally get it done.

What do you feel are the biggest challenges facing our district and the state of Minnesota?: Like every other area in the country right now, the biggest issue we need to deal with is how do we get our economy going again safely. How do we get our kids back to school so that they can get the education they need and deserve. One of the issues we have talked about for years that has been really emphasized now, is our areas lack of internet service. Continuing to invest in rural broadband is going to be critical now more than ever, but we are also going to have to balance that with the other services Minnesotans expect. We also need to promote manufacturing in our area, processing facilities for our local farmers, mining on the range, and getting the pipeline built to protect our environment and bring needed infrastructure jobs to a part of the state in need of an economic boost.



Michelle Lee - DFL

How do you feel the state government is handling the COVID-19 pandemic?: Lives and livelihoods have been lost in this pandemic and yet I am hopeful we will continue to work together by following common sense precautions to slow the spread of COVID-19 and limit its devastating toll on our communities. Sadly there are those who have chosen to politicize this pandemic. In these uncertain times the health and welfare of our communities must be among our greatest priorities as citizens. I support our governor and our health experts as they work with the knowns and many unknowns surrounding this baffling threat as they continue to make decisions based on science and common sense to help us protect our families, friends and neighbors. In a post pandemic world our continued reliance on one another's strengths and our shared values will be critical in rebuilding our communities. I know we are up to the task.

What are your top priorities for the coming term?: Our communities in Senate District 11 are more than a pit stop on a super highway to something better. We deserve better. As the next senator to represent our district I will fight for our rural communities. I believe the best economic tools available to us are an educated and a healthy workforce. Regardless of our zip codes our families deserve fully funded public schools and access to affordable and accessible healthcare. The men and women who get up and go to work everyday to support our families also deserve a living wage and safety on the job. My priorities also include supporting our small businesses that also support our families. Whether they are located on our main streets, on the outskirts of town or outside the city limits, small businesses are the backbone of our economy and they deserve a fair shake in the work of serving the needs of our communities. I'm not looking for a career. I had a successful career as a journalist sharing your stories and how decisions in St. Paul and Washington impact your lives. As your next senator I look forward to being your voice in St. Paul..

What do you feel are the biggest challenges facing our district and the state of Minnesota?: Our biggest challenge will be maintaining the public services to the standards we rely upon to thrive as communities, including public safety, healthcare systems and our public schools. It's no secret our local, county and state governments will face difficult decisions due to deficits caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Before these decisions are made it will be up to each of us to provide input on programs and services critical to the success of our communities. It will also be essential for us to build consensus regardless of political affiliations. The health and safety of our families must not be at the mercy of political winds. For too long the word compromise has been missing in the vocabulary of our elected officials. Whether we identify as Democrats, Republicans or Independents, we all value the benefits of our way of life in our towns and rural communities. This is our common ground. This is where we will build a better Minnesota for everyone.



Pine County Board of Commissioners —District 4

The District 4 seat on the Pine County Board of Commissioners represents the Cities of Bruno, Denham, Finlayson, Rutledge, Sturgeon Lake, Willow River and the townships of Pine Lake, Bremen, Kettle River, Norman, Birch Creek, Sturgeon Lake and Windemere.



John Mikrot Jr.
(Incumbent)
Occupation: Currently I am a small business owner, and a farmer. I am also a current Pine County Commissioner.
Three most recent or significant roles in civic involvement:
I am on the committee for Pine County’s Chemical Health Coalition, the East-Central Regional Development Committee, and recently spoke at the rally for Willow River’s C.I.P. in Moose Lake.

What are your top three priorities for the county?: 1. To provide the best possible services to the citizens of Pine County with the least possible financial impact. 2. To bring my knowledge and common sense to the board so that we can best serve the citizens of Pine County. 3. To equally and impartially represent all citizens of Pine County.

How can the county provide adequate services while being mindful of property tax impact?:Getting bids for services that are provided by the county (such as road construction/repairs, insurance for county employees, etc.).

What can the Board of Commissioners do to help Pine County prosper?: The Board can help Pine County prosper by always being willing to explore new avenues to bring businesses in to the county, by exploring housing options for those who need them, and by using commonsense and being fiscally physically responsible.

JJ Waldham

Candidate Waldham was contacted but did not respond to the questionnaire .

Willow River School Board



Connie Mikrot
(Incumbent)
What are your reasons for running for Willow River School Board?
As I wind down my fourth year on the Willow River Area School Board, my decision to re-run came down to my passion to advocate for the education of the students in our area communities. Providing our students learning opportunities to meet their needs will help set them up for success, whether that’s the next grade level, or the next steps after high school. As a board

member with children in the district, locally employed, and an active participant in community events, I feel I'm accessible and approachable for parents and community members and am always willing to listen to help ensure our board is looking at the complete picture before making decisions. Our current board and administrative team have a good working relationship, and I would enjoy the opportunity to continue to be part of this team and to serve the district for another term.

What are the biggest challenges facing WILLOW RIVER SCHOOLS at this time, and how will you address them? One challenge in our district is special education funding. While school districts are required to provide special education services, federal and state funding for those services cover only a small portion of those costs. That means local districts must budget to cover those costs, and the amount of funds needed can change dramatically each year, depending on students’ needs, and is challenging to budget appropriately to cover all costs without using money from our general fund. To address this challenge, we continue to closely monitor special education service needs, budget as best we can, and advocate to our local agencies and representatives to continue to work on special education funding needs in Minnesota. The special education funding challenge can affect our ability to provide the Career and Technology education courses to our secondary students that they seek to help prepare them for college or a job upon graduating. Due to our district size, some classes may have small participant levels, or difficulty funding another teaching position. To ensure we’re setting all students up for success, we continue to look at grant opportunities and creative collaboration with other districts so we can continue to provide these courses to our students

How should the school balance student safety with the need for a quality educational experience in the face of situations like the covid-19 pandemic? Just as individual learning needs are different for each student, so are their health and safety concerns and comfort levels. In a public school district setting, we need to look at what educational experience we can safely provide for the majority of the students and staff during a pandemic situation, understand the risks, address them with sound procedures, and monitor and adjust as we move forward. I understand not everyone is comfortable with in-person learning for various reasons, and I feel our district has done a great job incorporating the online learning option this fall for those seek that alternative to obtaining their education. I appreciate the amount of time, planning, and heart our district spent working on a plan to ensure our students and staff have a safe learning environment during this pandemic.

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Askov City Council

Mike Gutknecht
(Incumbent)
Candidate Gutknecht was contacted but did not respond to the questionnaire.



Michael Weske
(Incumbent)
Occupation: Commercial Kitchen Appliance Technician at a local employer
Three most recent or significant roles in civic involvement:
- Proud member of the Askov Fire and Rescue Department.
- Freemason/Shriner
- Past president of the Northern Pine Riders Snowmobile Club, current Assistant Trail Coordinator, and past Director of the Minnesota Snowmobile Association.

What are your top three priorities for the City of Askov?: 1.) I think our current city council has done amazing work in making sure we have a wonderful town to call home and I want to see the community get involved in their town again. 2.) Keep the cost of city utilities at a reasonable amount to the people of Askov. 3.) I would like to see the city continue to welcome new people moving into the town.How can the county provide adequate services while being mindful of property tax impact?: We need to continue our balanced and fiscally responsible approach to county government. We need to continue to seek out opportunities for reform and cost savings and ensure that county spending has a good return on investment for taxpayers. During my time on the board I have led efforts to reform county government; we have combined departments, reduced management positions, and administrative overhead. This has allowed us to keep taxes low and reinvest those savings into improving critical county services and funding for public safety.

How can the city provide adequate services while being mindful of property tax impact?: Once the water issue is cleared up I feel that for such a small town we have adequate services. It would be nice to explore the option of natural gas service for city and area residents to make another affordable utility available.

What can the City Council do to help Askov prosper? Keep the city utilities low to help people afford to live here; keep the city and properties in town looking inviting and not let the town look run down. I always want to be an open ear to listen to what people have on their minds to help keep Askov a great place to live.



Lisa Hughes
Occupation: I am currently a homemaker. Previously I was the owner/operator of an eyeglass repair business.
Three most recent or significant roles in civic involvement:
- I am a graduate of the Citizens Police Academy in our previous home state.
- I donate my time to whatever group calls upon me for help.
- Since moving to Askov I have attended nearly all of the city council meetings as I believe civic involvement begins with knowing how your community operates and what issues they may be facing.

What are your top three priorities for the City of Askov?:To foster sustainable and smart growth. To continue the support and improvement of the safety of the public. And to provide exceptional service to the community. But, in addition to these, I would also like to see more residents attending city council meetings and I have some ideas on how to encourage more participation that I would like to try out. And, I would like to create a program for the junior high/ high school level that would encourage our youth to become active in their local government..

How can the city provide adequate services while being mindful of property tax impact?: To be totally honest, I really struggled with this question. I could throw out ideas like using Development Fees charged to new business and residential builds or levying a more rigid set of fees and fines on the current businesses and residents, but those are just wordy smoke screens. In reality, with growth we will see the need to keep city services updated for the General well being of the community and that will require occasional increases in property taxes. But if we use things like Development Fees and other fees and/or fines, particularly fees/fines that are structured progressively, which can dramatically increase revenue we should be able to minimize the overall impact of any tax increases.

What can the City Council do to help Askov prosper? They can work together for the good of the community first and foremost. They can find ways to encourage businesses to come to Askov and they can find ways to offer incentives to new businesses that provide jobs for local citizens. In this day and age, it is essential for communities to seek growth otherwise they will stagnate and city revenue will not be able to keep up with the cost increases that come with everything over time.

Willow River School Board (continued)



Jennifer Burlak

What are your reasons for running for Willow River School Board?

I am running for Willow River School Board to be involved with the decisions that affect our students, staff, and community. I am a Willow River High School graduate, a community member and a parent to children who will be attending Willow River Schools for many years. I understand the responsibility of being a school board member and I bring a fresh perspective, integrity, and a willingness to work as a team with the rest of the school board.

What are the biggest challenges facing WILLOW RIVER SCHOOLS at this time, and how will you address them? Many of the current challenges for the school involve the ongoing COVID pandemic. The school must be prepared to make changes quickly and have multiple plans in place to ensure education is continued whether the learning model is in-person, hybrid, or fully virtual. There is also the challenge of keeping up with sanitary measures for the health and safety of our students and staff, which include added expenses for those measures. Teachers and staff at the school are working harder than ever to provide both virtual and in-person lessons and support to students, while keeping students health a priority. The staff must receive continued support from the school as well as access to all resources needed. If elected, I understand the commitment and will attend meetings, give input, and make decisions that are best for our students and staff.

How should the school balance student safety with the need for a quality educational experience in the face of situations like the covid-19 pandemic? The school currently has many safety and sanitary precautions in place this year to protect the health of our students and the staff. By maintaining these precautions while also providing a distance learning option for students not attending in-person, the school is doing their part to make sure students have safe access to education in whichever way works best for their families. Having both hybrid and distance learning plans ready and available allows the school to be continually prepared to provide a quality education for our children, especially if the time comes when fully in-person classes are no longer an option. Willow River School has been working with Pine County Public Health to plan and stay up to date with COVID numbers in Pine County, and the school must also continue to maintain communication with parents about expectations and the constant changes occurring.



Aziz Al-Arfaj

What are your reasons for running for Willow River School Board? As a current School Board member, I got involved with the school board 4 years ago because as a parent of two school-aged children and a son of a teacher, I wanted to directly be involved in shaping my sons' educational experience and to be a voice for other students and parents. Two of my greatest strengths are the ability to actively listen and think critically, and I will continue to listen to teachers, parents, and students to allow them to have an active role in the students' education.

What are the biggest challenges facing WILLOW RIVER SCHOOLS at this time, and how will you address them? I believe that education should be as unique as the individual learner. As one who struggled with learning disabilities in school, I recognize and place value on the support and tools provided by teachers to have the confidence to achieve. I will keep creating space and community in our school to promote a quality learning environment for all. I believe all students have the ability to be successful learners. I will continue to support the administration at Willow River to push themselves to think outside of the box for our students and will help to shape an atmosphere in our community to voice their fresh perspectives and ideas as we tackle the issues we face as a community and school.

How should the school balance student safety with the need for a quality educational experience in the face of situations like the covid-19 pandemic? One of the greatest challenges we are facing as a district is low enrollment. A goal in our strategic plan is to maintain long term enrollment stability. We need to increase enrollment by 1-2% each year over the next five years by recruiting new students and retaining our current vibrant student population. As a school board we need to bring more opportunities to incentivize new students to enroll and keep our current students. I was actively involved in the conversation on how we can collectively come together to solve these problems. One of the programs that the administration brought to Willow River, and I am a big proponent of, is the 'Top 20 program' which supports the importance of placing value on emotional wellness which builds healthy student behavior where students not only survive, but thrive. We also need to offer more career and technical education courses, increase more college classes at Willow River, and continue to maintain and nurture our current program for 4 year olds. We are navigating very uncharted territory with the covid pandemic. Even as we face so much uncertainty this school year; as a board member, I am not losing sight of our mission to continue to build a safe, healthy, nurturing and productive learning environment for all. The administration, parents, community members and students have put a solid plan together for any of the potential scenarios we face. We will continue to listen to the state and make the best decisions for our students, teachers and staff. We are a resilient community and we will get through this together. I look forward to serving you for another four years at Willow River schools.