

Community

VISION 2020



WARREN DILLAWAY | STAR BEACON

Liz Penna, president of the Ashtabula area chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, recently opened a meeting with Ashtabula city officials regarding the police department and its relationship to members of minority communities at Ashtabula City Council chambers.

Liz Penna

President of the Ashtabula area chapter of the NAACP works for justice and equality

BY MARK TODD
For The Star Beacon

ASHTABULA — The desire to work for justice and equality has burned hot in Liz Penna for many years.

Penna, president of the Ashtabula area chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, said she first experienced racism as a very young student in Conneaut.

"I was an outcast," she said. "I didn't know what prejudice was until I went to kindergarten."

Such treatment was foreign to Penna, who said she grew up in a household where both family and strangers — especially those down on their luck — were treated kindly and with respect.

"I was always taught to help somebody," she said.

As a student, Penna wasn't afraid to make her voice heard if a school policy smacked of unfairness. "I was kind of a rebel," said the member of Conneaut High School's class of 1974.

Penna, 64, of Ashtabula, is now channeling that spirit into her new role with the local NAACP, a leadership position she officially accepted at the start of 2019. She suc-

ceeds Adam Holman, who stepped down after many years at the helm. Penna said she "shadowed" Holman for more than a year to help her prepare.

The duties are more than she anticipated, Penna said. "It's challenging," she said. "Much more challenging."

Penna has an ambitious plan for the local NAACP, but needs more working members to put those ideas into motion.

"I'd like to see more action from the members," she said. "There's work to be done here."

She is seeking people to fill vacant administrative positions, but is really focused on finding a person to serve as youth advisor. Penna said she attended an NAACP conference and was struck by the energy displayed by some of the event's younger speakers, she said.

"They were knowledgeable and well-spoken," she said.

The spark Penna saw in those youths is lacking here, she said. Local youngsters appear aimless and adrift, she said.

"Young people here look so lost," Penna said.

A youth advisor affiliated with the NAACP could make a difference, said

Penna, who knows a thing or two about the role. She worked as youth director for the former Mary Chapman Center in Ashtabula before it closed a few years ago.

"These kids need to know they are somebody important," she said. "Some of them think they have no hope and no future."

The COVID-19 pandemic is only compounding the concerns of young people, Penna said.

"This is a scary time," she said. "There is a lot of anger in these kids. School has been taken away from them."

The youth advisor position is just one of many goals Penna has outlined for the organization. Some highlights:

Building better awareness of the NAACP's purpose and principles in the community. "We want people to know what we do," she said. Improve diversity in local government, including positions at Ashtabula City Hall and the county.

Improve diversity in the city of Ashtabula's safety forces, as well as school districts, law firms and medical facilities in the area. Get the local NAACP more involved in established charitable and civic organizations in the county

by putting members onto boards of directors. There are many groups in the area working towards the same goals, Penna said.

"We need to join forces," she said. Boost awareness

of local, national and global politics. Emphasize to high school graduates the importance of a secondary education. Teach youngsters the history of their ancestors.

For the short term, Penna wants to sit down with local health officials to see how COVID-19 is affecting people of color in the county. The virus is disproportionately impacting minorities across the country, health experts have said.

Penna is also looking to recruit a wide range of people with specific talents. The NAACP is becoming more diverse, delving into issues such as the environment and housing, and people with skills in these areas — and more — would be a big asset.

"There's something everybody can do," she said.

The death of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police sparked protests and a fresh focus on racism in the United States. Since its founding in 1909, the NAACP has been working diligently within the system to alter

attitudes and address the injustice that continues to plague many Americans. Much of the effort goes into enacting laws that deal with those issues, Penna said.

"[The NAACP believes] change comes from legislation," she said. "We want to see changes in laws so incidents [like Floyd's death] will not happen again."


Recent protests have helped boost awareness of the systemic racism that exists, but response has shown the country still has much to learn, Penna said.

"Protests are helping bridge gaps, but at the same time opening some gaps," she said. "The issues are still there."

Media attention has been focused on protests in bigger cities across the country, but problems aren't confined to major metropolitan areas, Penna said. Smaller cities, like Ashtabula, are not immune.

But while racial tension can exist in smaller communities, residents of a small town can also display a friendliness and understanding when trouble comes, Penna said.

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Voters' choice

November elections will shape Ashtabula County

BY BRIAN HAYTCHER
bhaytcher@starbeacon.com

JEFFERSON — Ashtabula County voters will face a number of choices when they fill out their ballot in November, and the presidential election is only one of many.

Two of the Ashtabula County commissioners are up for re-election, as is the sheriff and county prosecutor.

All of the candidates interviewed for this piece were emailed a list of questions and given the same amount of time as their opponents to respond to the questions.

All three county commissioners are currently Republican, and have been since 2016, when Kathryn Whittington and J.P. Ducro were elected. President Donald Trump beat former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in Ashtabula County, 23,318 votes to 15,577. Ducro beat incumbent Daniel Claypool in the 2016 election, 22,823 votes to 15,375.

Whittington beat incumbent Peggy Carlo by a much closer margin than Ducro's in 2016, 20,871 votes to 18,229, according to election records.

There were no contested primaries in the commissioners race.

DUCRO VS HAGAN

Ducro will be facing former Geneva Council President Susan Hagan.

Ducro served as Ashtabula Council President before being elected to a seat on the county commissioners. He decided to run for a county commissioner's seat originally to take the experience he had from that position and apply it on the county level, he said.

"I decided to run for re-election because I very much enjoy serving the people of the county and have many unfinished projects I would like to keep moving forward," Ducro said.

Those projects include expanding broadband internet access, finalizing a new community corrections and rehabilitation facility, continuing debt reduction and improvements to the Lodge at Geneva-on-the-Lake and supporting economic development.

Ducro is a small business owner.

"I can personally speak to the struggles of small business in our community every day," he said. "I have to make decisions with the resources available to our businesses and we cannot spend money we do not have. I hope residents would want the commissioners to look at their tax dollars the same way."

A better-prepared work force, access to the internet for rural residents and the opioid epidemic are the biggest challenges facing Ashtabula County right now, Ducro said. "All these concerns have been made even more apparent during [the COVID-19 pandemic]," Ducro said.

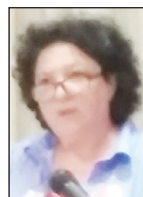
He said there are currently steps being taken



Whittington



McVoy



Hagan



Johnson



Cooper



Niemi



Ducro



O'Toole

to try to fix broadband access for rural residents.

Ducro said voters should support him because of his priorities as a commissioner.

"I put people and the community first," Ducro said. "I don't care about political parties or who gets credit for ideas or accomplishments. I just want to see good things happen for Ashtabula County and for all people to be treated with kindness, dignity and respect regardless of their differences of opinion."

Hagan served on Geneva City Council for six years, spend part of that time as council president. She is a member of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers and will officially retire this year.

"I know what it is like to get up very early in the morning to work in extreme heat and cold," Hagan said.

Hagan said she has both government and leadership experience from her time on Geneva City Council.

When asked why she wanted to run, Hagan quoted what her father said when he was asked why he was running for state representative in the 1980s.

"You and I have an obligation to make the world a little less painful and bring a little more dignity to human beings," she said. "That's his legacy. I carry that with me."

The safety of county residents in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic is the biggest challenge facing Ashtabula County at the moment, Hagan said.

"The county commissioners should lead the way in providing our residents with accurate information," Hagan said, "and to do everything within our powers to protect the most vulnerable folks, our senior [citizens], our children and those with underlying health conditions."

Hagan said voters should support her because she knows what it is like to struggle to make ends meet.

"I know what it means to drag yourself out of a car dead tired and dirty after working at a job that had no heat in the winter and no air conditioning in the summer," Hagan said. "You don't forget that. And I don't forget how important dignity is for workers."

WHITTINGTON VS MCVOY

Whittington will be facing Conneaut Councilperson-at-Large Angel McVoy

Whittington worked on for Ashtabula County Children's Services for 15 years before becoming a commissioner.

"The Board consists of many individuals with unique backgrounds and perspectives and I bring a unique perspec-

tive having been active in the social services arena advocating for both children and families for years," Whittington said.

Her current term as a commissioner is her only experience with elected office, which she considers a positive, she said.

"I come into the job having served directly in the community, having worked for county government and also having been a long time member of our community that brings a strong voice to the table," Whittington said.

One of the biggest challenges facing Ashtabula County right now is dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, Whittington said.

"During this time, I have been a steady voice that has worked hard to meet the ever growing demands that come every day from the coronavirus pandemic," she said. Whittington leads the Economic Recovery Task Force, which meets once a week to provide resources for small businesses in the county, she said.

Whittington said voters should support her because she has been focused on making the county a better place since her first day on the job.

"You need a committed and dedicated person that has a record of [delivering] results," Whittington said. "During my time I played an instrumental role including the formation of the Crime Enforcement Agency of Ashtabula County which is taking drugs and drug dealers off our streets."

Whittington's original opponent, Christopher Newcomb, dropped out of the race shortly after the primary results were certified. In June, the Ashtabula County Democratic Party announced that McVoy would face off against Whittington.

McVoy is currently in her second term as an at-large member of Conneaut City Council, and she is president of State Road Occupational Medical Facility.

"I love Ashtabula County and want to promote and expand it as much as possible especially after gaining experience from working on City of Conneaut council," McVoy said.

McVoy touted her record as a member of Conneaut City Council.

"I have passed legislation that has revitalized the sewer department, [replaced and repaired] major infrastructure and advanced economic development, especially at Route 7 and I-90," McVoy said.

McVoy said she has also served as a liaison to the Conneaut Port Authority, Conneaut Convention and Visitors Bureau and Conneaut Health Department.

There are a number of challenges facing

Ashtabula County that require action, McVoy said.

"It is not one challenge, but a systematic approach that will be needed to lead Ashtabula County forward," she said.

Voters should support McVoy because of her passion and an open-door policy, she said.

"I was raised by hard working middle class parents who instilled in me a strong work ethic and to be upfront even in difficult situations," McVoy said. It is not about favors or favorites, it is not about party affiliations; it is about growing and developing our county for success."

JOHNSON VS NIEMI

William Johnson has served as Ashtabula County Sheriff for more than two and a half decades and his 2016 reelection bid was unopposed.

"I have dedicated the past 40 years of my life to serving the people of Ashtabula County, first as a dispatcher and then as a deputy sheriff, until my election in 1993," Johnson said.

Johnson said the sheriff's department has had a balanced budget every year he has been in office and has provided quality law enforcement services and jail operations while fulfilling state mandates.

Johnson owned a small business in the Ashtabula Harbor for 20 years and served as president of the deputies' bargaining unit before he was elected.

"My tenure as president of the deputies' bargaining unit provided first-hand experience with negotiating contracts," Johnson said.

"My success as a private business owner demonstrates financial responsibility and management skills which have proven to be beneficial in running the county's largest law enforcement agency."

Johnson said the biggest issue currently facing Ashtabula County is the COVID-19 pandemic.

"As a result of this pandemic, county and local budgets have been strained," Johnson said.

He said the biggest impact from the pandemic has been on the county jail and inmate population.

"Special precautions, quarantine cells and overall jail operational staffing and plans had to be adjusted to keep staff and inmates safe," Johnson said.

He said there have been no cases or outbreaks at the jail because of the precautions he and his staff implemented.

Johnson said voters should support him because of his leadership, education, experience and history as a business owner.

"My record speaks for itself," Johnson said.

"My senior staff and I want to continue with our mission by supporting, enhancing and implementing many programs that have made the sheriff's office and county jail more efficient, offsetting costs to taxpayers while fulfilling the state mandated duties of my office and the Ohio Revised Code."

Bill Niemi is seeking to unseat Johnson in November. Niemi served as a lieutenant in the sheriff's department.

Niemi has been in law enforcement his entire adult life.

"After having worked with the current sheriff for over 24 years, I decided to pursue a dream of mine which was to someday be the sheriff of Ashtabula County," Niemi said. "I came to realize I wasn't getting any younger and felt the time was now."

Niemi started his career in law enforcement as a patrolman for the Jefferson Police Department before moving to the North Kingsville Police Department. He started working at the Ashtabula County Sheriff's Department in 1995, he said.

Niemi rose to the rank of senior staff lieutenant after serving as in the road division as a K-9 officer, then as a sergeant.

One of several big issues in Ashtabula County is the opioid epidemic. Another is financial issues from the loss of sales tax revenue.

"Some tough decisions will have to be made," Niemi said. "I know this as I was there when Sheriff Johnson and I, along with other senior staff members made those decisions in the past."

Niemi said voters should support him because he believes it is time for a change.

Niemi pointed to a number of issues, including increased dispatching fees for police and fire departments and a lawsuit over K-9 handlers as evidence of his point.

COOPER VS O'TOOLE

The position of county prosecutor is also up for grabs with a race between current prosecutor Cecilia Cooper and challenger Colleen O'Toole.

Cooper was appointed to fill the remainder of Prosecutor Nicholas Iarocci's term after he was elected Conneaut Municipal Court judge in 2019. She was previously Iarocci's chief deputy.

"I want to make a difference in my community," Cooper said. "Being county prosecutor is a great opportunity to work with other elected officials to bring industry and innovation to Ashtabula County. The position is also a tremendous responsibility."

Cooper was elect-

ed to the position if district attorney for the Southwestern Judicial Circuit in Georgia twice, the equivalent of a county prosecutor's position in Ohio, she said. In that position, she was responsible for a six-county area the size of Delaware, she said. Cooper moved to Ashtabula County in 2009 and took a job as an assistant prosecutor in 2011. In January 2020, she took office as county prosecutor.

"In those nine years, I have prosecuted every level of felony offense," Cooper said. "I have been lead counsel in dozens of jury trials here in Ashtabula County, including aggravated murder trials."

She said COVID-19 is the biggest challenge facing Ashtabula County.

"I took office in January," Cooper said. "By February we were working with the health department reviewing their authority and responsibilities during a health emergency. In addition, we had to advise our clients on changing federal and state labor laws."

Cooper said voters should support her because she is the most qualified candidate for the job.

"I am the only candidate who has presented cases to Ashtabula County grand juries," Cooper said. "I have tried criminal cases in Ashtabula County courts ranging from drug dealing to aggravated murder. I have helped victims prepare for trial and argued for justice on their behalf."

O'Toole is a former appeals court judge and worked to help the Abu Dhabi Judicial Department develop best practices in legal commercial court.

"The prosecutor serves as the chief legal counsel for the county, its office holders and its trustees," O'Toole said. "The job is diverse encompassing criminal prosecution as well as civil, managerial, policy and administrative responsibility for the county."

O'Toole said has the competencies required to perform the job.

O'Toole won the three-person Republican primary, beating area lawyers Malcolm S. Douglas and David Per Due. She received more than 50 percent of the votes in the three-way race, according to election results.

The biggest challenges to the county are to maintain continuity in function and open access to justice during these challenging times, O'Toole said.

O'Toole said Voters should support her because she is tough, innovative and experienced.

"My justice system experience is vast, having written and decided over 800 appellate opinions and trying over 300 cases both civilly and criminally," O'Toole said.

She said she will serve the citizens of Ashtabula County with honor, integrity, transparency, efficiency and accountability if elected.

PENNA: County NAACP president works for justice, equality

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ple always come together," she said. "Any type of problems, they come together."

The local NAACP wants to be a leader in the problem-solving process, Penna said.

"People always knew

what was going on regarding diversity, but nothing was ever done," she said. "But (everyone) can come together under the

right leadership."

The local organization is making strides. Membership has grown from a handful when Penna became presi-

dent to several dozen today. She wants to see continued growth in numbers.

"People do know the NAACP is

alive in Ashtabula," she said.

To become a member of the local NAACP or to volunteer, contact Penna at 440-969-5276.