

MINUTES
Wilton Democratic Town Committee
March 3, 2010, Room 21 at Comstock Community Center

PRESENT: John Kalamarides, Alysia Benzinger, Carol Ball, Paul Burnham, Tom Burgess, Kelly Franklin, Sharon Grace, Fred Herot, Mitchell Hirsch, Ted Hoffstatter, Charlie Lewis, Deborah McFadden, Ernie Ricco, Art Shulman, Hermon Telyan

GUESTS: Amy Harris, Peggy Reeves, S.C. James Lee, Denise Merrill, Carol Young-Kleinfeld

SPEAKER: Majority Leader of the Connecticut House of Representatives, Denise Merrill – candidate for CT Secretary of State

MEETING OPENED

At 7:34 p.m. Chair John Kalmarides called the meeting to order. On behalf of the members of the WDTC, John thanked Sharon Grace for her services for the last 2 years as Secretary, noting she had done yeoman's work.

GUEST SPEAKER

- State Representative Peggy Reeves of the 123rd Assembly District introduced Denise Merrill, currently the majority leader of the CT House of Representatives, who is running for the office of CT Secretary of State.

Denise Merrill started with some background on her career. She represents Mansfield, Chaplin (54th District) and this is her 17th year in Connecticut's House of Representatives. Prior to becoming Majority Leader, she served as Chair of Appropriations. She is an attorney, and was a high school teacher before seeking elected office. Her 3 children attended Mansfield public schools, and she got her start in civic life on the Mansfield Board of Education. She has also been involved in the Connecticut League of Women Voters, the UConn Alumni Association, the Women's Campaign School at Yale, and the National Conference of State Legislatures where she co-chaired the Blue Ribbon Commission on Higher Education. Her hobbies include gardening, hiking, and playing classical piano.

Combining her legal training and commitment to students and civic life, she ran law and citizenship education project before joining the legislature, and developed a curriculum on civil rights for K-12 students. Her district includes

UConn and she has mentored many students. Her goal is bringing people into civic life, and she feels the current climate not good for our democracy - public life needs to be more civil again. Merrill sees the job of Secretary of State as safe-guarding elections. Money in politics an issue, exacerbated by the recent Supreme Court Citizens' United decision.

Sharing her personal history and acknowledging that economic times are tough for many people in the state, Merrill noted that there are lots of inequities. Merrill noted that her grandfather, like many, lost his job during the Great Depression, and without the WPA which put him to work, her mother would have starved. For that reason, FDR became a hero to her family, and instilled in her the belief that government has power to make a positive difference for people and families. Over 90,000 jobs have been lost in CT since the start of the recession, and Merrill has convened a job growth panel to help address the issue.

Merrill noted that Governor Rell has essentially "checked out" of her office, and state agencies that should be promoting job and economic growth have been neglected for 10 years. At the same time, Merrill noted that there is too much bureaucracy within many state agencies. For example, businesses can't even register online with the Secretary of State's office. Merrill pledged that if elected, she would work to streamline and modernize the department's operations, while spending money wisely and efficiently.

- At 8:00 pm, John Kalamarides opened the floor to questions for Denise Merrill, both in her role as current majority leader, and as a candidate for the office of Secretary of State.
 - John Kalamarides asked what **leadership's position was on the large potential budget deficit for CT**. Merrill answered that last January revenues fell off cliff (CT lost 40% of income because a lot of people stopped having jobs. She noted that government is not a business; when people are out of work, need healthcare, are old, or sick – that is when they need government the most; unfortunately, when many people at once are in dire straits, the time of greatest need coincides with least resources. Right now, the goal of the legislature is keep both the state and families afloat; but the challenge is that one person's waste is another's essential program. Surpluses from the last 4-5 years at the state level were spent on education, rather than raising taxes. Now have major deficit due to dramatic drop in revenues + increased demand for services. We are in same boat as 49 other states.

The Governor's budget calls for higher taxes, but labels them "fees" on hospitals, which can ill afford it. The legislature cut 8 billion from budget (by raiding funds, small tax increases on high earners, dramatic cuts in

program). However, the 2 biggest cost centers in the CT budget (healthcare and energy) don't easily lend themselves to cuts. Healthcare will bankrupt nation, states, towns, businesses if not reined in. State healthcare provider of last resort. Medicaid is 4B out of 18B state budget and 80% of that is for nursing homes. Many nursing homes themselves are low or no profit – 17 currently bankrupt. If want healthcare, must pay for it. Healthcare is sucking funds from education and everything else. To make budget happen will need to cut healthcare, aid to towns, education & raise taxes. It will hurt, and it is politically untenable; but those arguing for even more draconian cuts would be sending Connecticut down the same path as California. Comes down to what people want for quality of life for CT. When cut state budget, someone loses a job, when cut pensions, middle and lower class retired lack the funds to make ends meet. Doing this requires cooperation across parties, and that isn't happening right now.

- Art Shulman asked about the status of the **Citizens' Election program** for public financing for state elections. Merrill indicated that enacting that law led to the biggest and most profound change in a decade in the capital. With it, legislators like Peggy Reeves are not beholden to special interests. The legislature is working on bill to address concerns of court about minority party. Trying to get through in next few weeks. Matching grants complicating things for everyone, gubernatorial race in particular.
- Charlie Lewis – **asked about nursing homes**. 17 in receivership scary. Per Merrill, it costs 7K per person per month at nursing home. In CT, which has a population that is aging, and sicker, many senior citizens are on title 19 (meaning the state pays nursing home costs).
- Sharon Grace inquired as to whether a **junk food or soda tax** has been considered for CT, noting that such a tax would be regressive, but rationally related to healthcare costs. Merrill said had been proposed, as have toll roads (which would raise 1B), use tax, gas tax, and keno. Merrill noted that taxes aimed at discouraging or encouraging behavior can have impact on edges, but the state's budget problems really stem from lack of sufficient progression in the income tax, and / or the absence of a statewide property tax, coupled with low corporate tax income (land use policies poor; therefore traffic policies poor; therefore businesses won't come).
- Mitchell Hirsch said he'd heard no talk on **taxing insurance companies** and asked why? Denise said insurance companies and large corporations pay almost no taxes in this state. Windfall profits taxes has been mentioned, but there is high resistance to this in the legislature as they don't want to discourage business). Mitch asked of what use are profits if not helping economy or creating jobs? It was noted that CT is lowest tax state in area –

6% top rate income tax, and surrounding states have county tax, which we don't. Denise concurred and noted that the legislature had lowered taxes every year 1993-2003 (property, income, gas).

- Carole Young-Kleinfeld, Wilton's Democratic Registrar of Voters, asked Merrill what she considered the most pressing issues vis-à-vis the **process for elections**. Merrill said the system seems to be working; she acknowledged that paper ballots are a pain for registrars after the vote, but they work well for voters. Carol asked what Merrill's position was on post-election audits of electronic voting machines? Merrill said she'd want to be careful loading costs onto system. Finally, Carol asked if Merrill felt the state did do we do adequate training of town registrars. Denise said no.
- Deborah McFadden inquired about the history and projected future of state in terms of **bonding** (what is rating, outlook, do we use this tool?). Denise, we are not, by law, allowed to bond. We have securitized future earnings; proposal from the governor to do so for clean energy fund (this would be a one-time fix to basically borrow from future earnings). Cannot bond prospectively. Used to be AAA, now AA. We have a very high debt per person. The state spends 1B per year on school construction and 1B year higher ed., plus builds magnet and charter schools, many of which are mandated by court rulings. But overall, school population is shrinking, and state is going to need to slow down on school constructions; Towns are used to state building schools.
- Charlie Lewis asked Merrill how the state get into such bad shape, noting there had been no **income tax** at all until Governor Weickert's term. Denise: True, but when income tax put in, sales tax halved. Ideally, you want a mix of property, income, sales. CT overly-skewed toward income tax.

ELECTION OF OFFICERS

- John Kalamarides called for election of officers to serve for 2010-2112. He submitted the slate as follows: John Kalmarides, Chair; Deb McFadden, Vice Chair; Art Shulman Treasurer; Kelly Frankin, Secretary. Nominations made, seconded and vote to close nominations all received unanimous approval. John noted that he had set out the goals for 2010.

CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

- John Kalamarides noted that Alice Ayers and Glen Shaddick retiring to Long Island. John asked DTC for ways to honor. They demurred on dinner, but want us all at tag sale.

- James Lee, newcomer to Wilton, recognized as a new attendee at the meeting and welcomed.

APPROVAL OF THE MINUTES

- Motion to approve the minutes from February; second; unanimously carries.

TREASURER'S REPORT

- Art Shulman noted there was \$950 in WDTC account, and there had been no activity in the last month.

SELECTMEN'S REPORT

- Ted Hoffstatter noted the selectmen had approved the preliminary budget, but it still needs to Board of Finance; trying to get the 2.4% increase closer to 2% (this increase stems from contractual obligations and retirements – all departments came in flat or below prior year's budget)
- Plastic bag ordinance; Ted tried to circulate a working document illustrating Westport's ordinance at the last Board of Selectman meeting. He got some pushback and was encouraged to go slow. Ted asks that members who support this initiative come to selectman meeting in April; lobbyists coming. Need letters to editor. Also need to educate people that this ordinance would pertain to retail bags only - goal is not to push paper bags, but rather to get folks to bring re-usable bags. China and most of Europe has already done this.

STATE CENTRAL REPORT

- Ted and John noted the upcoming Jefferson Jackson dinner on April 12. Ted commended John on the Tri-Town candidate forums, noting it was a first for the area and more of this regional coordination is needed.
- John moved that Ted be re-nominated and re-elected as rep. to State Central. So moved and unanimously approved.

NOMINATING COMMITTEE REPORT

- Paul Burnham said the nominating committee had met with Amy Harris, who has served one term on SWRPA (Southwest Regional Planning Agency, which coordinates plans for transportation and growth in region) and would like to

serve again. He also reported that the nominating committee had discussed recommending Karen Burke (who is no longer vice chair of the Board of Education) fill the slot as that board's nominee for SWRPA. He made a motion that the DTC proceed with both nominating; motion passed unanimously.

WEB SITE COMMITTEE REPORT

- Kelly Franklin noted she had revamped the website to feature more news on the homepage and include the Twitter feed that had been approved at the prior WDTC meeting. We have approximately 30 followers on twitter, and Kelly is looking to add more. She and Mitchell Hirsch are tweeting on the WDTC's behalf – linking to articles on the site and local and regional papers, as well as broader economic issues.
- Kelly also noted that she'd sent out the first WDTC monthly email newsletter (called Inside Scoop) to a list of 162 recipients; 30% + opened (3 times the average for this type of service in the political arena).
- Carol Ball reported that she created a Facebook group for Wilton Democrats, and that about 3 dozen individuals, primarily teens, had already joined the group.
- John reminded the group that the Wilton Patch and other two local papers have made a standing offer to WDTC to publish editorials from us. Mitch Hirsch submitted an article this week on "Emulating Hoover"; which was a response to Toni Boucher's most recent column state spending. Her solution to reduce state workers wages and benefits.

EVENTS COMMITTEE REPORT

- John noted that the spring fundraiser will be held on Saturday May 8 at Trackside from 9:30 a.m. – 11:00 a.m. Congressman Jim Himes and State Representative Peggy Reeves will be our guest speakers.

CAMPAIGN COMMITTEE REPORT

- Deborah McFadden noted that in 2010 there will be no incumbent running for Governor, Senator, CT Secretary of State, or CT Attorney General. While WDTC members are encouraged to participate in those campaigns, the focus of campaign committee's efforts will be on re-electing Peggy Reeves and Jim Himes (others will benefit from get out the vote efforts for those two candidates).
- Mitchell Hirsch is the official liaison between the WDTC and Himes campaign. Deb, Mitch, and John met with Mark Harmon, the new campaign manager for

the Himes campaign. He is planning a grassroots campaign; looking for field director by end of March. The main campaign headquarters will be in Bridgeport, with satellites TBD, set up by end of March. Westport, Wilton, Weston will have joint phone banks. Start getting emails. Names to Mitch of folks Jim should call – donors, campaign workers, centers of influence in community.

- John Kalamarides noted that fundraising help needed for DTC, and that he and Deb are seeking people to run in the 26th and 125th.
- Sharon Grace is the chair for Peggy's re-election campaign. Paul Burnham is the Treasurer for the campaign. Sharon reported that a team consisting of herself, Peggy, Paul, Carol, Carole and Kelly are starting to put together campaign plans. Sharon encouraged WDTC members to start talking to their friends about why they like and support Peggy. She also asked for volunteers to host coffees and handle clippings.

ADDITIONAL CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

- John Kalamarides covered some key upcoming events
 - Wednesday, March 10 - tri-town forum for gubernatorial candidates at the Westport Town Hal at 8:00 p.m. – all WDTC members encouraged to attend.
 - Tuesday, March 23rd – Wilton Democratic caucus. Meeting room A, Town Hall at 7:30 p.m.
 - Saturday, March 27th 4:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. – place TBD. Jim Himes a guest for a closed meeting of the WDTC.
 - Tuesday April 6, at 7:30 p.m. at Town Hall – WDTC Meeting. DTC, Susan Bysiewicz will be the guest speaker.
 - Monday, April 12 5:30 p.m. to 10:30 p.m. – Jefferson Jackson Bailey Dinner – CT Convention Center, Hartford
 - Friday, March 26th - State Central meeting in Hartford
 - Wednesday, May 5th - monthly WDTC meeting Town Hall at 7:30
 - Saturday, May 8th – spring fundraiser at Trackside from 9:30 – 11:00 a.m.
 - Tuesday, May 18th – special meeting re-nominate the Democratic Registrar of Voters.

- Tuesday, May 25th - Peggy's convention.

OTHER ANNOUNCEMENTS

- Ernie Ricco noted that Sylvia Guberman of Stratford, a kitchen table political mentor to Ernie, Bill Clinton, Joe Lieberman, and Bruce Morrison passed away recently.
- Paul Burnham thanked John Kalamarides for his great leadership last two years, and noted on behalf of the WDTC that we were looking forward to next two!

ADJOURNMENT

- Motion to adjourn, second. Adjournment at 9:31 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Kelly Franklin
Secretary