

Lebanon County Farm Bureau

2016 PA House of Representative Candidates Questionnaire

The Lebanon County Farm Bureau Board of Directors would like to present responses collected from the candidates running for election. As a nonpartisan organization, we will not endorse any candidates but will give each candidate, in contested elections within our county, an equal platform to explain their positions to our membership. Please use this information to aid you in your election decisions.

Question #1: Farm Bureau members believe agriculture is a vital part of the Lebanon County economy and culture. Do you agree? As our Representative, how would you envision assisting and strengthening agriculture and what experiences and qualities do you possess to accomplish this?

Responses for the candidates for the 101st district are:

Pier Hess: I agree Agriculture is a vital part of our community. Once elected, I will work to ensure budgetary provisions are designated to support the existence, growth, and business of agriculture within Pennsylvania. This is an area just as deserving of attention and funding as others, and it needs to be treated as such. Additionally, agriculture sustains many local families and businesses. It is essential the industry is protected.

Frank Ryan: Agriculture is a critical part of Lebanon County AND our Nation. Protecting the farmer and the family farm are essential to the well-being of our community. My experience as a Certified Public Accountant and having worked on a farm as a young boy give me the financial experience and knowledge to protect the farmer, the farm family and our community from the unintended actions of laws and regulations that harm us.

Jeff Griffith: I absolutely agree that agriculture is a vital part of the Lebanon County economy and culture. As your representative, there is much that I would have to learn about the needs of the agricultural community in our county, admittedly. However, I can guarantee that you would have my ear, my understanding and my assistance. In this area, my personal qualities that would be helpful is an understanding of free-market enterprise, an understanding that unnecessary government regulations prevent good business, and a willingness to hear from the agricultural community itself – not some government agent from Harrisburg.

Responses for the candidates for the 102nd district are:

Russ Diamond: I still agree with this statement. The success of family farms is critical to the stability and prosperity of our region. As your Representative and as a member of the House Agriculture & Rural Affairs Committee, my role is bridging the gap between your needs and state policy. I will continue to meet with you, listen to you, and to involve you directly in the crafting of any new state policy that impacts your operations. You are the lifeblood of our local economy and as you go, the Lebanon Valley goes.

Tom Houtz: I do strongly agree. I happily live in a farming community. I believe in the words once told to me by a friend who is a farmer, “we have to protect farmland, God isn’t making any more”. As a Township Supervisor, I loved in favor of zoning to protect farmland and funding for Agricultural Preservation. I understand some of the challenges that farmers face: urban sprawl that brings intolerant neighbors, increasing environmental regulations on chemical applications and of course, property taxes.

Responses for the candidates for the 104th district are:

Sue Helms: I fully agree that agriculture has been and is a vital part of the economy and culture of Lebanon County and the entire State of Pennsylvania. Below are some of the ways that I have helped support farmers and the entire agricultural community of my time in office. *(Edited due to space limitations, topics included: amendments to the state vehicle code, relieve farm families from inheritance tax burdens, eliminate discrimination in taxation of family farm tax burden, funding agricultural programs, fairness in farm equipment dealership agreements, and clean & green amendments.)* - Editor's note

Nate Curtis: Agriculture is not only a vital part of the Lebanon County economy and culture, but Pennsylvania and America as well. As State Representative, I plan on meeting and speaking with farmers in my district to hear their concerns and respond to their needs. I am a true believer in laissez-faire economics. I understand that the government can be a burden on small businesses of all types, but especially farmers. I've never been a farmer, but as a heavy equipment operator for the U.S. Air Force, I've been a vital part of many projects overseas including concrete, asphalt, and earth moving labor. Because of my experiences, I appreciate hard working laborers, such as farmers, unlike most politicians. I plan to take the voices of farmers and all of my constituents to the Capitol building to ensure that tax burdens are lifted, and hard work is appreciated.

Question #2: Real estate property taxes are a constant concern for farmers, as most are depending on the land they own for their livelihoods. What plan do you envision that would prevent the costs of the State and public school employee pension crisis from being thrust on landowners while at the same time maintaining local control over our public schools?

Responses for the candidates for the 101st district are:

Pier Hess: Pension reform is a critical issue in Pennsylvania. Property taxes, and their potential elimination, are as well. There is currently a movement to have all incoming state employees, such as Legislators, use a 401k or match-based system. I wholeheartedly agree with this, and would never expect the state to do more for me than I am willing to do for myself. We need to sit down with experts in the field, colleagues of our own and opposing political parties, and ensure a creative solution is reached which does not place the burden on hardworking taxpayers.

Frank Ryan: Real estate taxes must be reformed and eliminated. HB-76 combined with sound reduction in state spending and elimination of waste, fraud and abuse in state programs will provide the backbone of true reform of confiscatory taxes. I own my own business and I specialize in keeping companies out of bankruptcy. My plan is to bring meaningful changes to Harrisburg because I know how to fix these types of out of control government programs. I have been working in this field for well over 30 years.

Jeff Griffith: I am the only candidate for the 101st District that has fully supported HB/SB 76 – the best opportunity for the elimination of property taxes. The current plan would be the first in a line of dominoes that would need to fall to fix these issues. The pension crisis will require moving immediately to a 401k style, defined contribution program for new hires. Next voluntary concessions on the part of those who are already in the current pension system. Last, I want to move toward greater local control of education – perhaps even dissolving the current form of the State Department of Education.

Responses for the candidates for the 102nd district are:

Russ Diamond: I am the prime sponsor of HB1115, a constitutional amendment that would eliminate all property taxes in Pennsylvania. I'm a co-sponsor of HB76, to eliminate all school property taxes. I was a member of the House Majority Leader's workgroup on property taxes, helping to shepherd HB504 to final passage to provide a 40% school tax reduction for the average homestead/farmstead owner. On pensions, we must seek ways to keep school boards from increasing future pension obligations, seek concessions from public employee unions, and reduce state spending elsewhere to fulfill state payment obligations.

Tom Houtz: I am in favor of House Bill 76 to eliminate school property tax. I also favor decreasing the size of our bloated state government. The leaders in our General Assembly should lead by example and be the first to end the Cadillac pension plan at the state level. Additionally, privatization of the state liquor stores would further decrease the number of employees participating the pension plan and subsequent crisis.

Responses for the candidates for the 104th district are:

Sue Helms: As State Representative, I understand there are many issues driving the cost of property taxes. First, I support and have voted for legislation to eliminate property taxes because I don't believe someone should lose their home because they can't afford the escalating cost of their property taxes. Second, I also understand that along with health care costs, the pension liability crisis is a huge contributing factor in the high cost of property taxes. I supported and voted for Senate Bill 1 that was the first real pension reform legislation to be to address this difficult issue. This legislation passed the House and Senate, and was vetoed by Governor Wolf. I will continue to push to pass strong pension reforms to fix this problem and help get property taxes under control. Third, I supported and voted for legislation that provides local property owners and taxpayers with more of a say in controlling property tax increases in their district.

Nate Curtis: A bill similar to the Property Tax Independence Act is a possible solution to farmers and homeowners. This bill would eliminate school property taxes and allow home owners & farm owners to afford their land and dwellings. Too often people are not able to pay off their mortgages, or ever actually own their home and land because of ridiculous taxation. A real reform of these taxes is a must have for Lebanon County. Should I be elected, I would support such a bill, and push for serious property tax reform.

Question #3: As an elected official, what principles guide your decision making? Do you believe you are primarily responsible to reflect the views of a majority of your constituents as opposed to expressing your personal convictions?

Responses for the candidates for the 101st district are:

Pier Hess: As a prosecutor, I am used to having tough conversations with people who possess opposing interests and goals from myself. I am skilled in these negotiations, and for years have undertaken them to reach an end result which is just in light of all circumstances, but which will never fully please all involved. I am prepared to take these skills to Harrisburg.

I also believe it is my job once elected to represent the approximately 65,000 who reside in the 101st District. I must be accessible and listen to them, and I must ensure I know their concerns. Simply put, I

am a voice of the people. I would vote in accordance with the majority views of my base, as I believe that is the right thing to do.

Frank Ryan: My faith is my guiding principle. I am a devout Catholic, a Christian Faith, and believe that our nation was founded on Judeo-Christian principles. I will vote my conscience and am NOT beholden to any special interest groups.

Jeff Griffith: As an elected official, I do have the responsibility to represent the views of the majority of my constituents. However, my constituents will have elected me knowing that there are specific principles of morality, freedom and founding truths of the Commonwealth (including free-enterprise and preservation of traditional values) upon which I cannot (and will not) compromise. This firm resolve will lead to creativity in problem solving and to finding a consensus opinion that will meet the needs of the District – without the pitfalls of compromised principles.

Responses for the candidates for the 102nd district are:

Russ Diamond: My first responsibility is upholding and defending the provisions of our state constitution. The primary role of government is to protect individual rights and to serve as an unbiased arbiter when the rights of individuals clash. I answer to the will of the 63,000 constituents of the 102nd District. My personal convictions may carry weight in my decision making process, but I also believe that if my personal beliefs differ from the majority of constituents, it is my duty to communicate with them about those differences prior to making any legislative decisions. Openness and transparency count.

Tom Houtz: I believe in making good decisions based on truth and factual evidence. I believe in making decisions where ethics and moral values prevail. I understand as an elected official that I am (as a current elected official) and will be a representative of my constituents, however, I do not sell-out my personal convictions. At the end of the day, I want to rest in the knowledge that I maintained my moral fiber and have represented not only my constituents, but my children and family as well.

Responses for the candidates for the 104th district are:

Sue Helms: I believe I was elected to represent the will of my constituents. For this reason, I continue to go door-to-door, hold town hall meetings and attend thousands of events around my district so I can heard directly from my constituents and know where they stand on the issues. I will continue to do so as State Representative.

Nate Curtis: As State Representative, I will always put our God and His word first. My constituency is second only to that. Unlike many current elected officials, I will never forget that I work for the people that put me into office. I am overseen by the voters of the 104th district, not the party or its leadership.