

State Legislative Candidates – SD 37 – Barbara Conley

1. Why are you interested in serving the people, families, and businesses in northern Michigan?

Michigan is my home. I was born and raised in this state, attended University of Michigan and Michigan State University. I have made Northport my home, and respect and value the people of northern Michigan as hard working, good people, who help neighbors. During my career, I served on several volunteer boards and volunteered at different causes. I was privileged to run the first national cancer precision national medical study, and in this role negotiated with dozens of pharmaceutical companies, several diagnostic companies, 3 offices of the FDA, several government agencies, over 1000 clinical sites, clinicians, and patient advocates. This project was a great success and gave me the experience to see a difficult, never before attempted program to completion. I believe I have the experience necessary to serve as State Senator and help solve some of the long standing problems in Northern Michigan: affordable workforce housing, keeping our waters and air clean, bringing new year round jobs and careers here and improving healthcare access – especially mental health care and womens health.

2. How will you use your role to support the economic vitality of our region?

I will be seek to understand and support the needs of small businesses as well as community groups trying to grow new businesses in our region. I believe we need more career type opportunities for our young people; these will provide good pay and will help us keep our young families here. We desperately need attainable workforce housing, universal access to internet and more childcare providers. I will work to bring these things to our region.

3. Do you believe local government should have broad authority to regulate short-term rentals?

I do believe local government is the best entity to regulate short term rentals. Local government understands the population of the area, as well as local needs and challenges.

4. How would you address the shortage of skilled labor in northern Michigan?

I believe we need to incentivize people to take up skilled jobs in our area. We should give scholarships in the form of grants that depend on serving the area after finishing education/training. We should work hard on getting more housing that is affordable to our workforce; this will be helpful if we need to attract skilled labor from outside the area, which may be what we need for several types of jobs. We should encourage secondary school students to consider the skilled jobs that are needed – and offer educational credit for internships, and potentially also paid internships, depending on the particular demands of the internship.

Mentorship is also important, yet our current skilled labor may not have the time for it. Potentially this can be mitigated by having volunteers or educational institutions take over management of internships that are actually performed in local businesses.

5. How would you prioritize leftover funds from federal aid packages and surplus dollars in the state's general fund?

I would put these funds to use for immediate needs that do not need to continue for long periods of time (and don't need continued funding), since we will likely not have a continuing source of this funding. Needs such as: infrastructure (building and infrastructure repair and improvement, greener buildings, BROAD BAND build out), preparing to build additional attainable housing stock or even incentivizing this with grants; demonstration projects that address current needs such as mentorship for skilled workforce or mental health providers, etc.

6. The availability of housing is a barrier to business growth and talent attraction in our region. How do you intend to address the affordable housing shortage?

There have been some starts on this project by several entities; I believe the state should incentivize builders to build more housing; repurposing old lumber when possible; regional cooperation when possible; lowering the cost of getting started. We should look at regulations and see whether the regulation can be less burdensome. We should encourage local entities to set up Community Land Trusts to ensure that the initial affordable workforce housing remains as affordable housing upon sale by the original owner. This builds some equity for the initial owner, while serving the housing needs of the community. We should encourage smaller houses, as well as prefab houses. We also need more rental units that stay in the affordable range so perhaps the state can assist local government to attain and maintain such units by using tax or other "breaks" for developers.

7. Many families struggle to secure quality child care. This can be a barrier to attracting talent and keeping people in or bringing people back into the workforce. How will you work to increase access to affordable and quality child care?

I think we should build on some of the demonstration projects now going on, such as providing mentorships, money and training for those willing to professionally provide child care, in their homes or outside the home. Child care providers need to be paid fairly for their work, and right now the rate of pay is too low. Yet, if the pay is higher, parents will not be able to afford childcare. There should be a sliding scale fee for childcare based on a family's income, with potentially making up the difference with funds provided by the state, locality, business and donations. We need well trained, skilled providers, so incentivizing those interested in the education or training with scholarships that are forgiven if they provide childcare for, say at least 4 years in the area should be considered.

8. What are your solutions for supporting businesses being affected directly by inflation and supply chain costs?

This is a tough problem, as these supply chain costs seem to be lasting much longer than predicted, and the cost of goods is rising with inflation. Perhaps something can be done to lower business taxes temporarily, or to lower fees normally paid to the government temporarily, while the supply chain problem lasts. Hopefully the federal government can help to offset some of the costs to states for such programs.