The Democratic Candidate: Gov. Tom Wolf

Increased Investments in Education and a Natural Gas Severance Tax Are Among Incumbent’s Priorities

Proud of his first-term record, Gov. Tom Wolf says another four years in office will allow him to invest more in education, pass a natural gas severance tax, and boost the state’s economy by supporting major projects, like the Shell cracker plant in Potter Township, Beaver County. Wolf also wants to work with counties and municipalities to improve programs and services. “I’m committed to continuing to partner with local governments,” the governor says, “and ensuring that my administration is accessible to local government officials.”

Editor’s note: Gov. Tom Wolf will be facing off against former state Sen. Scott Wagner, a fellow York Countian, in November.

As is tradition, the News reached out to the campaigns to set up face-to-face interviews with all four candidates: Wolf and his Democratic running mate, John Fetterman, and Wagner and his Republican running mate, Jeff Bartos.

The Republicans visited the PSATS office in Enola separately in August, where each candidate spent an hour being interviewed and photographed by the Township News.

Despite multiple attempts to arrange to meet in person or by phone with Wolf and Fetterman, the pair opted to submit their responses via email and were provided the same questions as the Republicans. To ensure fairness and accuracy, the News is publishing Gov. Wolf’s unedited answers below as submitted by his campaign.

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PTN: What do you see as the relationship between state and local government? Also, how would you work to foster that relationship over the next four years?

Gov. Wolf: A significant amount of the state's budget is distributed to local governments to provide key services to our residents. From education to social services, from corrections to economic development, our local governments are working hard to improve the quality of life for residents. To maximize the impact of these programs and services, I believe that we cannot work in silos. Rather, we need to break down the barriers that hinder communication and stall progress.

I’ve proposed merging the state departments of Human Services, Health, Aging, and Drug and Alcohol Programs into one unified Department of Health and Human Services. This would consolidate programming so that local governments do not have to navigate four different agencies.

I have also taken action against and been a vocal critic of state bills that would pre-empt the ability of local government to make the decisions that are best for their residents. I consider stakeholder engagement to be of the utmost importance, and I have worked hard to involve local governments in the policy development process. This has been
TOM WOLF

and will continue to be my approach to the relationship between state and local government.

PTN: Every few years, we hear an outcry against local government from those who want to move toward bigger, regional government. Meanwhile, local governments have been working cooperatively to save money and increase efficiency.

When it comes to local government, are you for cooperation or consolidation?

Gov. Wolf: There is a high need for cooperation among local governments. I am committed to encouraging and facilitating opportunities for local governments to come together and look for economies of scale wherever possible.

PTN: How do you respond to those who say a regional form of government would be more efficient and effective?

Gov. Wolf: The importance of local governments for providing services to residents cannot be overstated.

Education, social services, corrections, and economic development are just a few of the services for which we rely on local governments. I remain committed to working with local governments to ensure that they have the resources necessary to carry out these services and to protecting their ability to make decisions about how best to serve their residents.

PTN: Unfunded mandates are an increasing burden on state and local governments...from cleaning up the Chesapeake Bay to managing stormwater. Will your administration curtail unfunded mandates in the future and how?

Gov. Wolf: Whereas federal mandates handed down to local governments can (be) burdensome, I’ve been committed to protecting the ability of local governments to make their own laws.

I’ve worked hard to implement a Chesapeake Bay cleanup strategy that does not unduly burden local governments and to increase funding for critical programs so that local governments are not faced with unfair burdens. I’ve also worked with counties to provide flexibility on leased properties owned by the state and fought for federal resources for disasters and emergencies to prevent putting the onus on local governments alone.

We must continue to work to prevent downshifting costs through cuts to aid for municipalities and counties. I am always interested in discussing any legislation that’s headed to my desk and its impact on local government with townships, municipalities, and counties before making a decision on what action I will take.

PTN: PSATS and its member townships have been pushing for common-sense reforms that would save taxpayer money and help townships work smarter, such as electronic advertising options for local governments, prevailing wage threshold reform, and arbitration reform for municipal police. Where do you stand on such reforms?

Gov. Wolf: We must work together to find ways that government at every level can be more efficient and to prioritize tax dollars on those programs that deliver critical resources. It has always been important to me to work with local government to determine reforms that can save money.

PTN: Recent legislative proposals have called for the restructuring and merging of various state agencies. Currently, the state Department of Community and Economic Develop-
ment oversees many local government services, but some would like to see this department merged and restructured.

Would you be supportive of a separate state Department of Local Government, a one-stop shop for municipalities under one roof?

Gov. Wolf: Cross-agency initiatives provide key opportunities to cut down on bureaucracy without a need for legislation to consolidate. For example, the Governor's Center for Local Government Services serves as a one-stop shop for local government to access important resources to streamline operations. I established the Governor's Office of Transformation, Innovation, Management, and Efficiency (GO-TIME), which provides a streamlined, faster process for applying for and distributing state aid. This new tool saves taxpayers $140,000 annually. We don't need legislation to make government more efficient, and I would be interested in exploring the opportunity to create a similar one-stop shop for local government with local leaders.

I have also overseen the Keystone Communities Program, which is designed to encourage the creation of partnerships between the public and private sectors that jointly support local initiatives, such as the growth and stability of neighborhoods and communities, social and economic diversity, and a strong and secure quality of life. The program allows communities to tailor the assistance to meet the needs of its specific revitalization effort. Earlier this year, I approved support for 22 community revitalization projects throughout the commonwealth totaling nearly $5.4 million in state support.

I recognize that community development has many benefits for our municipalities, including improving the lives of local residents and attracting businesses to grow the local economy. I'm committed to continuing to partner with local governments and ensuring that my administration is accessible to local government officials.

PTN: Townships across Pennsylvania are facing overwhelming challenges in providing quality and cost-effective emergency services, including fire protection and ambulance transport. The recruitment and retention of volunteers are critical to the long-term future of these services.

What solutions do you have for this problem and how could local governments and the state work together to finally address these challenges?

Gov. Wolf: Local emergency services are critical to ensuring the safety of citizens, and it is important that we continue to help them keep up with increasing financial demands. In 2016, I signed Act 172 into law, which allows local governments to offer tax credits to fire and EMS volunteers. Earlier this year, I announced the approval of 11 projects through the Municipal Assistance Program, which will assist local governments with planning for zoning, coordinating emergency services, and creating comprehensive plans. I also elevated the role of the fire commissioner to a cabinet-level position because of the critical need to make sure local governments have adequate EMS and fire protection. These are a few examples of the state's commitment to assisting municipalities and ensuring that they have all of the resources they need to effectively implement services.

PTN: We're hearing a lot about problems with the state pension system. An undercurrent to that conversation sometimes calls for a single pension system for local governments, even though most of those pensions are in good shape.

What are your thoughts on the pension issue at both the state and local levels and how do you plan to address the issue?

Gov. Wolf: It is essential that we preserve hardworking state and municipal employees' paths to retirement and ability to receive the pensions they deserve while ensuring that our state pension system is stable and sustainable. In 2015, I created the Municipal Pensions Task Force to make recommendations that addressed the unfunded liability of municipal pension plans and how to place those plans on sound financial footing for the long term, all while maintaining retirement security for municipal employees. In 2017, I signed...
bipartisan, comprehensive state pension reform into law that slashes Wall Street fees, lowers costs, drastically reduces risk to taxpayers, and pays down our debt. The solution is not to put all retirement systems into a statewide system, but rather to create policies that focus on helping those systems that are struggling.

PTN: Act 47 was created to help distressed municipalities. While only two townships of the second class have ever been in Act 47 status, quite a few cities and boroughs are.

What do you see as the best way to prevent distressed communities? Many say consolidating local governments into regional centers would provide more stability. What do you think?

Gov. Wolf: Act 47 is a critical tool for helping restore the fiscal health and stability of distressed municipalities. My administration will continue to work with local governments to identify what form of help would be the most effective for their individual needs and will continue to provide financial and technical assistance to help them get back on the path of prosperity.

Under my administration, communities such as Pittsburgh have been able to exit Act 47 because of their successful efforts to improve stability and financial health. It is critical that we remain focused on local solutions, not a one-size-fits-all approach to helping struggling regions.

PTN: What is the No. 1 issue you would tackle if elected to a second term?

Gov. Wolf: Education has always been the cornerstone of my administration. I took office after Harrisburg Republicans had cut $1 billion from our schools, resulting in mass teacher layoffs, cuts to important programs like pre-kindergarten, and larger class sizes. My top priority was investing in our education system to ensure that students were getting the education they deserved. I’m proud to say I have fully restored the billion-dollar education cuts and expanded career and technical education.

After fully restoring the Harrisburg politicians’ $1 billion dollar cut to education, we are now working to invest even more dollars in our classrooms. The most recent budget builds on prior-year increases in education funding to provide an additional $313.5 million, which will be invested in pre-K and Head Start, basic education, career and technical education, and higher education, among other areas. With another term in office, I would be able to continue to build on these investments.

By investing in education, we have increased the number of children attending pre-kindergarten by nearly 50 percent, increased the number of students in career and technical education programs by 42 percent, and increased the high school graduation rate to nearly 90 percent. These are the positive results we can expect to see when we invest in education, and I am committed to continuing to prioritize education to produce more positive results like these.
PTN: During a second Wolf administration, in what ways would Pennsylvania be different four years from now?

Gov. Wolf: We've accomplished a lot together these past three years. We've restored the Harrisburg Republicans' billion-dollar education cuts and expanded career and technical education. We've expanded health care for 720,000 Pennsylvanians and driven our uninsured rate to its lowest point in history. We've increased opportunities for over 50,000 seniors to age in their homes. We've cleaned up Harrisburg by enacting some of the strongest ethics reforms in the country.

My new way of doing things has stirred things up in Harrisburg, and I have no intention of going back to the old ways of doing business in the Capitol. I'm going to keep fighting to change Harrisburg so it works for Pennsylvanians and building on the progress we have made.

A second Wolf administration would see increased investments in education, especially career and technical education. We will keep fighting to pass a severance tax to make sure that big oil and gas are paying their fair share. We will continue to demand ethics reforms, voting reforms, and criminal justice reforms. We will help more seniors age in the comfort of their homes, protect all Pennsylvanians' access to quality and affordable health care, and grow the economy through investments in large projects like the Shell cracker plant, the Port of Philadelphia, and a steel plant in Johnstown. These are just a few of the accomplishments we can see with another four years in office.

I'm running for re-election because I'm committed to building a better government, economy, and future for all Pennsylvanians. ✪
Candidate Plans to Stand Up for Pennsylvania’s ‘Forgotten Communities’

Editor’s note: Braddock Mayor John Fetterman, the Democratic candidate for lieutenant governor, and Gov. Tom Wolf will square off in November against Republican candidate Scott Wagner, a former state senator, and his running mate, Jeff Bartos, a Montgomery County real estate developer.

As is tradition, the News reached out to the campaigns to set up face-to-face interviews with all four candidates.

The Republicans visited the PSATS office in Enola separately in August, where each spent an hour being interviewed and photographed by the Township News.

Despite multiple attempts to arrange to meet in person or by phone with Wolf and Fetterman, the pair opted to submit their responses via email and were provided the same questions as the Republicans. To ensure fairness and accuracy, the News is publishing Fetterman’s unedited answers below as submitted by his campaign.

**PTN: How do you view the role of lieutenant governor?**

Fetterman: I see the role of lieutenant governor as one that can serve as a statewide bully pulpit for moving Pennsylvania forward. I hope to stand up for the forgotten communities of Pennsylvania at the statewide level and work with Gov. Wolf to support local government.

**PTN: What unique qualities would you bring to the role if elected?**

Fetterman: In Pennsylvania, local government and criminal justice are major priorities for the lieutenant governor, and I have over a decade of hands-on experience with both issues. I’ve spent the last 13 years as the mayor of Braddock [in Allegheny County], working at the local level to stimulate the economy of a town that was on the brink. When I was first mayor, we didn’t even have an ATM in Braddock, and now there are four thriving restaurants in the downtown. This community was devastated by gun violence, and I worked with local law enforcement to create a community policing model that prioritized discretion, de-escalation, compassion, and trust-building on the part of the police. From that, we went five-and-a-half years without the loss of life to gun violence in our community.

**PTN: What do you think is the relationship between state and local government, and how would you fit into that as lieutenant governor?**

Fetterman: I will have the honor of chairing the Local Government Advisory Committee. I will work with the governor and local government stakeholders to build coalitions and lasting relationships to better the needs of our state’s residents at the municipal level.

Whether it’s stimulating economic growth, cleaning up the streets, or providing a good education, state and local government should work together to meet the needs of our state’s residents.

**PTN: State law requires the lieutenant governor to chair the Governor’s Local Government Advisory Committee. What vision do you have for its future?**

Fetterman: As the mayor of a small steel town that was once forgotten, the relationship between state and local government is something I’ve thought a lot about. It’s always been the keystone of my work as a mayor and as a candidate for lieutenant governor that no town, borough, or county should ever be left behind. Whether you live in Braddock,
Johnstown, Cheltenham, or Harrisburg, this huge state, made up of 67 counties, is also made up of hundreds of local municipalities. And while each community is special, has unique history, charm, and hardship, there are fundamental needs that we can all relate to: job security, access to health care, good education for our children.

PTN: Recent legislative proposals have called for the restructuring and merging of various state agencies. Currently, the state Department of Community and Economic Development oversees many local government services, but some would like to see this department merged and restructured.

Would you be supportive of a separate state Department of Local Government, which would be a one-stop shop for local government under one roof?

Fetterman: We’ve already seen Gov. Wolf do a great job in using his executive power to cut through red tape and save taxpayers’ money. It’s one of the many reasons that the state will benefit from another four years under his administration.

I look forward to working with the governor, using my own hands-on experience as a small-town mayor to support the programs he’s created that will streamline access for local government to state resources.

PTN: Townships across Pennsylvania are facing overwhelming challenges in providing quality and cost-effective emergency services, including fire protection and ambulance transport. The recruitment and retention of volunteers are critical to the long-term future of these services.

If elected, what solutions do you have for this problem and how could local governments and the state work together to finally address these challenges?

Fetterman: Quality local emergency services are essential for the safety of our state’s residents. I stand with Gov. Wolf’s decision to support municipalities in effective and efficient emergency service programs, including tax credits for fire and EMS volunteers, projects through the Municipal Assistance Program, and elevating leadership in emergency services.

PTN: Various proposals of importance to local government (the Act 13 impact fee, transportation funding, limited prevailing wage reform, bidding limit thresholds) have been enacted in recent years in part because the voice of local government is being heard in Harrisburg. What would you do over the next four years to ensure that local government has a seat at the table?

Fetterman: All I have worked toward for the last 13 years as the mayor of Braddock has been to ensure that all Pennsylvanians have a seat at the table. I am an outspoken advocate for a severance tax, better local infrastructure, and protecting workers by supporting unions. I will stand with Gov. Wolf to support these vital measures that give local government a voice in Harrisburg.

PTN: The issue of local government consolidation seems to come and go with each legislative session. Where do you stand on forced consolidation of local government versus voluntary cooperation?

Fetterman: There’s no way for us to get anything done without cooperation. As someone who has worked hard at the local level, I know how much more efficiently things get done when you are able to build partnerships.

PTN: What do you see as the best way to prevent distressed communities? Many say consolidating local governments into regional centers would provide more stability. What do you think?

Fetterman: Braddock has had Act 47 status since 1988. We understand “distressed” at a personal level, but we’ve come a long way. Because of that, we understand just how critical local government is in providing social services, community safety, and economic growth — and we are living proof of that in Brad-

PTN: Unfunded mandates are an ongoing concern for local government. How would your administration fight back against them?

Fetterman: I support Gov. Wolf’s commitment to local government autonomy and increases in funding local programs.

PTN: Pennsylvania’s Right-to-Know Law made important strides toward transparency in government. The trouble is, it also created some unintended and costly side effects for municipalities. What changes do you support to ease this burden?

Fetterman: I am open to working with local government officials to see how we can reduce the unintended and costly side effects of the Right-to-Know Law, which is an important tool that helps governments stay transparent and accountable to the people they serve.

PTN: What are the main issues you hope to address over the next four years and how would those impact township government and the residents who live in municipalities?

Fetterman: I have always said I will use the office of lieutenant governor to champion forgotten communities. Whether it’s investing in our state’s education system, standing up for unions, or increasing the minimum wage, these are all issues that impact all residents of our state and can be implemented at the local level.

PTN: If elected, in what ways do you believe Pennsylvania would be different four years from now? How would those changes come about?

Fetterman: In the next four years, I plan on working closely with Gov. Wolf to ensure that our government is run well and ethically and that we create more lasting jobs locally. The governor shook things up in Harrisburg in the last three years, and I intend to join him in that so that we can create lasting change for all of Pennsylvania.
Scott Wagner, a garbage man by trade, says he’s ready to make a clean sweep in Harrisburg. His first-term plans include dialing back unnecessary regulations and unfunded mandates and eliminating wasteful state spending. Tired of talk, Wagner says voters can expect action with his administration. “We’ve boiled the vegetables to death,” the candidate says. “It’s time that we get something done.”

“Scott Wagner has spent most of his life cleaning up messes. At age 10, he was shoveling horse manure at the family farm. Later, he dropped out of college to become a garbage man. He drove the trucks, picked up the trash, and cleaned the bathrooms, all while building a $75 million waste-hauling business in York County.

Now, the Republican candidate for governor wants to tidy up Harrisburg. “The problem in Harrisburg is that nobody cares. They just don’t care,” says Wagner, whose career in politics started in 2014 with an unprecedented write-in victory for state Senate. “I would have to say that a lot of people in local government are getting a little fed up. They’re tired of hearing, ‘We’re working on it…we’re working on it.’

“Well, I can assure you that there will be a lot of action in the first 90 days [of the Wagner administration], starting with the first five minutes after I’m sworn in.”

Because if the candidate is certain about anything, it’s this: “I’m going to win.”

That’s a bold statement, but then again, that’s Scott Wagner, who’s going up against Gov. Tom Wolf, a fellow York Countian and businessman, in November. The former lawmaker stopped by the PSATS office in August to discuss what townships can expect if he wins.

‘We’ve got to pull these mandates back’

An outspoken conservative who has been compared to and endorsed by President Donald Trump, Wagner has already mapped out a first-term to-do list that includes addressing Pennsylvania’s opioid epidemic, eliminating wasteful state spending, and straightening out the tangled bureaucracy at state agencies.

The candidate also says he’s going to step aside and let local elected leaders do what they do best: govern.

“I see the counties and the municipalities as the customers. It’s my role to be listening and looking [to them] for suggestions,” the Republican says, adding that he supports the creation of
a new agency, the state Department of Local Government, to offer specialized assistance. “Honestly, a lot of municipal officials know what needs to be done. They just need somebody who’s going to get it done for them.”

When building Penn Waste, his waste-hauling company, Wagner attended a number of municipal meetings — more than 1,500, by his estimate — and says that gave him an insider’s view of the challenges confronting local officials.

So instead of forcing municipalities to merge and consolidate, as some lawmakers and special interests have advocated, he wants to extend a helping hand. In particular, he wants to reduce state regulations and unfunded mandates.

“Harrisburg is like a monster with tentacles — it’s like the octopus nightmare,” Wagner says. And for too long, the state has been overstepping its bounds by imposing heavy-handed regulations on communities and businesses without fully understanding the impacts. “I see how dysfunctional it is, and I know we can do better.

“They pass these mandates down, and a lot of times there’s no path to paying for some of the stuff. [However], there’s a very large opportunity as governor to potentially roll back some regulations by executive order.”

Pennsylvania has more than 153,000 regulations — an astronomical number in Wagner’s mind — and he wonders how many are necessary.

Townships, for instance, are spending hundreds of millions of dollars a year collectively on requirements that sound good on paper but, in reality, baffle common-sense local leaders.

A good example is the prevailing wage, which must be paid on all construction projects over $25,000 (or $100,000 if transportation related). The problem is, the prevailing wage only serves to magnify the costs of the job, not the quality. Municipalities are also required to place expensive legal ads in local newspapers despite the fact that online advertising would reach a wider audience and be a faster, cheaper alternative.

“We have to go through the regulations and look at what’s nice to have, what we need to have, and what’s outdated,” the candidate says, noting that he supports eliminating the commonwealth’s prevailing wage mandates and reforming the legal advertising requirements. “Clearly, I’m not in favor of more regulations. I’m in favor of less. We’ve got to pull these mandates back. We’re choking municipalities, and we’re choking businesses.”
In fact, Wagner is eager to follow the lead of Maryland’s governor, Larry Hogan, a fellow Republican who rescinded 200 regulations by executive order during his first year in office.

“Nothing is sacred over in Harrisburg,” he says. “We have to look at everything and figure out what is the best way to be efficient and customer-service driven. Everything should be looked at.”

‘It’s time that we get something done’

During his first term, Wagner also plans to focus on several other long-standing and unresolved matters. That list includes local volunteer fire and ambulance companies that are struggling to stay open and a state pension system that is deep in debt.

“The talking time is over. I ran for the state Senate for a reason: because I was fed up with Harrisburg,” the Republican says, adding that he believes voters are ready for change, too. “We’ve

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<th>WAGNER ON THE ISSUES</th>
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<td><strong>The No. 1 issue for the candidate</strong></td>
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<td>Shifting Harrisburg to a zero-based budgeting system, which allocates funding based on necessity rather than on budget history. He estimates the new approach will save the commonwealth $1.5 billion to $4 billion in the first year.</td>
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<td><strong>Municipal consolidation</strong></td>
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<td>Agrees that the decision to merge or consolidate municipalities should be made at the local level. “People like local control,” Wagner says, “and I’m completely in favor of that.”</td>
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<td><strong>Pension reform</strong></td>
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<td>Supports the creation of a 401K-type retirement program for new state employees and teachers hired after a specific date. Does not believe the state should “meddle” with municipal pension programs.</td>
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<td><strong>Unfunded mandates</strong></td>
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reached the boiling point on frustration right now. [Harrisburg says], ‘OK, let’s have another hearing. Why don’t we put together another task force?’

“Look, we’ve boiled the vegetables to death. It’s time that we get something done.”

Wagner says money — specifically, the lack of it — is at the root of these and other problems, which have been aggravated by Harrisburg’s wasteful spending and misplaced priorities. He points to the “infamous” statewide public safety radio system as an example.

“We wasted $850 million to $1 billion on that radio project,” he says. “Just think of how many fire trucks and ambulances we could have purchased.”

Meanwhile, he says, volunteer firefighters are selling chicken dinners and raffle tickets to raise money for a crucial public service while watching their numbers decline and being hammered with training requirements.

On top of that, the money managers overseeing the state’s pension investments have received huge paychecks, which almost equal the returns they’ve delivered, a perplexed Wagner says. “I’m a business guy. I see a problem with this,” he says. “They shouldn’t have been paid or they should have been fired or fired first and then not paid.”

To address the pension issue, Wagner supports instituting a 401K-type retirement program for new state employees and teachers hired after a certain date.

On a larger scale, he also wants to switch to zero-based budgeting to combat what he refers to as the “financial crisis” in Harrisburg.

This cost-management strategy allocates funding based on necessity rather than on budget history. He estimates the new approach, which will require 30 state agencies to come up with “ground-up budgets,” will save the commonwealth $1.5 billion to $4 billion in the first year. That money, Wagner says, will be earmarked to support emergency services and other pressing needs in the commonwealth.

“We’re going to balance our checkbook in Harrisburg,” he says. “We’re going to be really serious about this.”

He also wants to take a closer look at Act 111, which allows police and firefighters to collectively bargain with local leaders for wages and other terms of employment, including pension benefits. When the parties can’t agree, they go to binding arbitration, which replaces the right of police and firefighters to strike.

The trouble is, Act 111 has at times resulted in overly generous arbitrator awards that have exceeded a municipality’s ability to pay. Townships want balance restored to the system. Police officers, on the other hand, have approached Wagner about the right to strike.

His solution: A meeting between police, fire, and municipal representatives. “We’ve got to bring everybody to the table,” he says, “so they can shake hands and walk away saying, ‘I think this is a fair deal.’”
Committed to progress

Ultimately, Wagner says, two characteristics are going to define his administration: a willingness to listen and a commitment to building consensus where it doesn’t exist.

“When I’m the governor — it’s almost like being a judge — I’m going to put my governor’s robe on, we’re going to sit down at the table, and I will represent everybody,” he says, noting that he plans to borrow a page out of the local government playbook. “When I go around to different municipalities, I see a tremendous amount of cooperation. Honestly, we need more of that in Harrisburg.”

And he guarantees that Pennsylvanians will notice a difference, whether it’s fewer potholes on state highways or more money in their paychecks.

“I’m committed to doing this for eight years, which would put me at 71,” Wagner says, “and believe me when I say this: I’m not going to look back at age 71 and not see progress.

“We’re going to clean all of this up.”

[Image]
Candidate Advocates Less Red Tape and More State-Local Collaboration

BY JILL ERCOLINO / MANAGING EDITOR

Political newcomer Jeff Bartos, the Republican candidate for lieutenant governor, remembers the first time he met running mate Scott Wagner.

As the pair talked, they realized they had a few things in common: both grew up in rural counties, both built successful careers as businessmen, and both believe that Pennsylvania can grow and prosper but, first, Harrisburg has to back off.

And they’ve been campaigning on this platform ever since.

“Four years from now, I want to be sitting here as we approach reelection, and I want to be talking about how we achieved a lot by getting government out of the way and letting people do what they do, which is to innovate and grow their communities,” says Bartos, who visited the PSATS office in August while campaigning. “You don’t need the state government for that.”

A self-described “Jack Kemp Republican” who has never held a state office, the candidate embraces new ideas, approaches, and opinions. He also uses the word “partnership” a lot. The term not only sums up his relationship with Wagner, who’s hoping to unseat fellow York Countian Tom Wolf as governor, but also indicates the kind of relationships the administration envisions with local government.

Because, for Bartos, there is no doubt: Townships, boroughs, and counties are where the real decisions are made.

“Good local government, well-managed, really has far more impact on citizens’ lives than who is the governor or who’s the president of the United States or who’s a senator or a congressman,” the Reading native says, “so I don’t believe in a top-down style. In fact, I very much believe in a grassroots and up style [of governing]. Therefore, the state partnering with local government is critical.”

Saying ‘no’ to red tape

Bartos, like Wagner, got a front-row seat on local government in action while working in the private sector. A Montgomery County real estate developer, he has spent many hours at municipal meetings and walked away with a deep appreciation for the men and women who serve their communities.

“I understand how important township government is to the quality of
life that we all enjoy in the commonwealth,” he says, adding that Harrisburg should act as a facilitator — not a dictator — in this relationship by providing funding for community programs and services and connecting local officials with resources and best practices. “That’s really the best role we can play,” Bartos says.

The state has to be willing to listen, too, so Wagner and Bartos plan to continue holding town hall meetings, a staple of their campaign, after the election.

“[Town halls are] terrific,” he says. “You never know what you’re going to get asked…you’re always a little tired afterward because you’re on your feet for an hour and a half or two hours…but they are just amazing opportunities to learn.”

And what the candidate has discovered is that many Pennsylvanians aren’t engaged with state government.

“People feel so disconnected from Harrisburg, especially above Route 80,” he says. “I come from a rural county, and Scott comes from a rural county, and that just woke us up. We’re going to have a very different culture in a Wagner-Bartos administration.”

“Gov. Wolf has had his opportunity to lead,” he adds, “and he hasn’t.”

Bartos also wasn’t surprised to learn that local government leaders are fed up with unfunded mandates, which he says are counterproductive to Pennsylvania’s future.

“It is hyper-critical for all leaders at the state level to be aware of unfunded mandates and what they are doing to our local governments and to promise our local partners, who really make it happen day to day around the commonwealth, that we are not going to be putting crushing burdens and regulations on them,” he says.

All too often, though, Harrisburg is eager to fix perceived problems with legislation — and without fully considering the consequences, he says.

“Harrisburg’s solution is to put burdens on local governments that don’t have the resources, funding, or manpower to handle them and then hold them accountable when [the state hasn’t] provided the resources,” Bartos says. “That’s no way to run the railroad.”

That, he says, will change if the Republican ticket wins.

“I look at almost everything through a prism of ‘I don’t want to increase burdens and red tape on people.’ We have enough of that,” he says. “The solution really, from day one, is that we have to talk about how these burdens will not be put on local governments without them having a seat at the table and having a real hand in the legislative process.”

**Listening and learning**

In keeping with that inclusive philosophy, Bartos plans to take full advantage of the Local Government Advisory Committee, which was established by law in 1996 and is required to meet at least twice a year.

As lieutenant governor, he would chair the group and says he wants to provide a forum where the 14 members, including a PSATS representative, can offer opinions on such issues as unfunded mandates, Right-to-Know Law reforms, which Wagner and Bartos support, and the creation of a new state agency, the Department of Local Government.

“The Local Government Advisory Committee is a real platform that the governor and lieutenant governor can use to stay connected to townships and counties and make sure that whatever issues are impacting local governments...we’re hearing about those,” Bartos says. “And while we may not always solve the issues, we will at least be aware of them as we advise the governor.”

And once local government takes its seat at the table, he says, its voice will continue to be heard.

“We fully intend to continue to travel the state and make sure that we’re hearing directly from local leaders on the issues that are most important to their areas,” Bartos says. “We’re doing it because it’s a smart thing to do and because we love hearing both the solutions that people are implementing and the challenges they are facing.”

Already, several major challenges have surfaced. Communities throughout the state are dealing with increasing deaths and overdoses from opioids, he says. They’re also witnessing the struggles of their volunteer fire companies and ambulance crews, which are losing members and having trouble paying the bills.

The state can help, Bartos says, once it gets its financial house in order. Zero-based budgeting is the answer, he says.

“We need to make sure that our revenues and expenses are in line with one another, that we’re not spending money we don’t have, and that departments aren’t continuing to spend the money they spent last year plus 3 percent because that is the way it’s always been done,” he says.

“Zero-based budgeting would require [state] departments and agencies to justify their spending for the next year and build a budget from zero by looking at what is critical, what is necessary, and what is mandated.”

Bartos says he and Wagner estimate the new budgeting approach will save up to $4 billion, which is funding that can be directed to communities to help fight drug overdoses and support public safety, among other things.

“Zero-based budgeting will allow us, in addition to some of the other reforms we’re going to put in place, to free up resources to help fund these critical services,” Bartos says.

**A fresh perspective**

While the candidate has never held a state office, he’s eager to get to work.

“I’m a private-sector businessman,” he says “and I think that’s a real advantage. I don’t come with any preconceived notions of how things have always been done, and I’m not afraid to ask a lot of questions and look for more efficient ways of doing things.”

And “unlike the current lieutenant governor,” Bartos says he’ll be an active and integral member of the administration.

“I’ll be a real partner with the governor in implementing the agenda that will move Pennsylvania forward,” he says. “Scott and I, we’re going to unlock Pennsylvania’s potential, mostly because we’re going to get government out of the way of people growing and fulfilling their dreams.”