

# Cutten, Gallagher present their cases to be Ulster's next comptroller

by [Christina Coulter/October 29, 2019/0 comments](#)



Lisa Cutten and March Gallagher.

In the wake of the departure of Elliott Auerbach, the only comptroller Ulster's ever known, two women well-known to local public life, Lisa Cutten of Kingston and March Gallagher of Rosendale, are running for the job.

Whoever wins the Nov. 5 vote will fill the remaining two years of Auerbach's term. Auerbach left office in May to take a position in the office of state Comptroller Tom DiNapoli.

Gallagher will appear on the Democratic and Working Families party lines; Cutten on the Republican, Conservative and Independence party lines.

Both registered Democrats, Gallagher got their party's nod at a convention in June, beating Cutten handily in a weighted tally of local Democratic committee members. Shortly afterwards, Cutten announced her intention to run on the Republican line, although she previously said she intended to drop out of the race if she did not get the Democratic nomination.

On July 2, Cutten was fired from her position as director of the county's Office of Accountability, Compliance and Efficiency, a job she had held since 2014: "[County Executive Pat Ryan] wanted to move away from accountability, compliance and efficiency," joked Cutten.

"The county executive has a role and the comptroller has a role," said Cutten when she was asked whether she could work harmoniously with the county exec despite the fact Ryan fired her. "They're independent, and I would fully expect if elected the executive and I would have a relationship based on mutual respect, both personally and professionally. We would act in a way that would be in the best interest of the residents of Ulster County. It is my belief 100 percent, or 125 percent, that the county comptroller does not belong in politics. It's about watching the money, that's it. It's rooted in fact. That's it."

"I think I can restore the relationship between the Comptroller's Office and the executive and the legislature. That's what this campaign should be about," said Gallagher when asked what the ideal relationship between the comptroller and the executive should be. Auerbach and former county executive Mike Hein, who also departed office for a job in state government, clashed often during their tenures.

Cutten, 60, started overseeing budgets when she was 26, serving as the comptroller for the City of Kingston between 1986 and 1998 after earning a bachelor's in accounting from Pace University. She went on to achieve certified public accountant status before serving as comptroller for the Town of Poughkeepsie and then the Town of Fishkill. After a stint working as a CPA in Kingston, Cutten worked as the county auditor before Auerbach

was elected in 2008. Working in this capacity, she uncovered a major instance of fraud carried out by not-for-profit organization Lower Esopus River Watch that she cites as an example of her ability to “follow the money.”

“An invoice went across my desk for \$50,000 and I didn’t understand what I was being asked to pay for,” said Cutten, a Kingston resident. “I started asking questions of the appropriate people and was ignored and eventually ridiculed before county committees. But I knew it was important to keep asking the questions. I produced a 33-page report plus attachments and that, along with presentations from the county attorney, the DA and an forensic auditor at the time were made to the legislature and they voted to send it to [the state] attorney general to investigate. They did investigate and prosecute ... the State Supreme Court decision in that case says that between 2002 an 2006 the ... organization took \$1.7 million dollars, and [it] had been successful in stealing hundreds of thousands in that time period. If I hadn’t refused to approve that \$50,000 payment, they wouldn’t [have been caught].”

In 2011, Cutten was hired as a senior auditor under then-comptroller Auerbach, where, she said, her department disconnected 300 unused phone lines. She was promoted to deputy budget director, where she worked to implement and train county employees in a new digitized countywide financial management system.

After attending County Executive Pat Ryan’s budget presentation earlier this month, Cutten said she already has ideas to streamline the county’s budget.

“The previous county executive had worked hard to rightsize the number of government positions and had to reduce the county’s staffing,” she said. “In this year, we’re taking a pretty serious move in the other direction. We need to keep an eye on it. I know that some of those positions are grant-funded, but sometimes with grant funding, it doesn’t materialize. Like the Public Defender’s Office. That eventually affects your fund balance. It’s something

that I want to take a look at."

Cutten also noted that of the \$13 million increase in the proposed 2020 budget, the smallest increase went towards health and mental health expenditures.

Cutten said she favors a more transparent, accessible presentation of the county budget, which for 2020 comes in at \$342.28 million.

"I would advocate for something that is more user-friendly," she said.

"Because I have experience and know the financial system, if the exec or the commissioner of finance didn't want to summarize it in a certain way or present comparatives, I'm in the position to offer that to the people in the official presentation from the executive."

Gallagher also advocated for a better online presentation of the budget online and said she wanted to save money by maximizing efficiency.

"Are we providing government in the best way that we can? That's a role that the Comptroller's Office hasn't had a lot of traction in the past years," she said. "Two of the CSEA employees from [the Department of Social Services] said to me, 'You wouldn't believe the number of times that we have to PDF the same documents.' The far bigger savings for taxpayers is in efficiencies."

Gallagher, who has attained endorsements from Auerbach, the CSEA and DiNapoli, worked as committee clerk for then-assemblyman Maurice Hinchey in 1989 and then worked as a budget analyst for the Assembly's Ways and Means Committee. She got master's degrees in public policy and environmental science before earning a law degree at Boston University and practicing environmental law. In 2001, she returned to the Hudson Valley and became chairwoman of the Ulster County Industrial Development Agency in 2006. She eventually headed up the county's Office of Economic Development. Gallagher said that while IDA chair, she enacted reforms and

implemented a "clawback" policy that allowed the agency to rescind tax benefits if businesses did not follow up on their end of the deal. She participated in the drafting of "Ulster Tomorrow," a plan for the county's economic future that was ultimately incorporated into the county comprehensive plan.

"I don't think it's about whether or not you have the credentials of being a CPA," said Gallagher. "It's about leadership. I've managed financial staff and that's what this job is about. You need vision and the ability to communicate with people, and that's what I bring."

In more recent years, Gallagher, a 51-year-old Rosendale resident, has overseen large budgets for not-for-profits, first with Hudson Valley Patterns for Progress and, until resigning to run her campaign, as the CEO of Community Foundations of the Hudson Valley. The nonprofit administers millions in charitable contributions and grants on behalf of local community organizations.

Gallagher said her interest in local government began with an interaction with a concrete contractor when she ran a private law practice in Saugerties. The contractor emotionally, she said, rolled out plans for the Ulster County Jail that he said would need "hundreds of change orders" on the project. As it turned out, the new jail was massively late and over-budget. The incident, she said, made her realize that the Ulster County government was in sore need of reform.

According to Cutten, Gallagher's ties to area nonprofits could pose a conflict of interest.

"Those relationships where she's given money over the past years will create an independence issue in appearance or in fact," Cutten said. "If you were sitting on a board, if you have a potential conflict, you can recuse yourself from a vote. As the comptroller, the decisions about what you audit or don't audit isn't something that you announce publicly ... I think that's a

serious issue."

Gallagher sees no conflict of interest between her nonprofit work and serving as comptroller: "I never made the funding decisions, I merely administered the funds," she said. "They're the ones that made the final grant decisions."

Gallagher turned the accusation around, saying Cutten is the candidate with the conflict of interest.

"If you look at government accounting standards... there is a direct bar there. [She] set up [the new accounting] systems. I don't have a conflict of interest, she has pointed to nothing in government accounting programs. She set up the new system, she set up the financial controls, she has the conflict. How is she going to audit her own work? If you build a building, do you want the builder to do the inspection?"

"I had more of an oversight role with respect to those grants," Gallagher continued. "I don't see any conflict whatsoever ... I have ethical responsibilities too and I take ethical training too. I think it's a moot issue — let the voters decide."