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Meet the Candidates: Saugerties Town Board

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17–21 minutes

The Overlook is conducting a series of interviews with candidates running for office in the Nov. 4 election, offering readers an opportunity to hear directly from those seeking to shape their communities. In this installment, Saugerties Town Board candidates Bill Barr and Stephanie Bassler, both Democrats, and Zachery C. Horton and Michael A. Sasso III, running on the Republican and Conservative lines, responded to questions via email. Voters will elect two of the four to the Town Board.

[The following has been lightly edited for clarity]

and concision]:

What do you see as the single most important issue facing Saugerties right now, and how would you address it in your first year in office?

Bill Barr: On my website I said one of the reasons I decided to run is that cuts in the Republican budget to fund tax cuts for the ultra-wealthy will eventually affect us locally. And here we are. The most important issue right now is how to feed those in our community who are down on their luck and depend on SNAP (food stamps) for their groceries. These are not just a few folks. According to the New York Times, one in eight Americans depend on SNAP. That funding has run out, and they need to eat! Fortunately, our Governor just announced that she is fast-tracking the \$30 million funding gap to help New Yorkers. The Town should work with County Adult Services

and the County Executive to identify townspeople in need and help them receive this aid. Federal funding will run out on November 1, just before the election, so even though the impact will be felt before the election, I must state it as the most immediate and important issue of the moment.

Mike Sasso: Our town government has lost the trust of its residents due to serious issues revealed in the recent audit—lack of transparency, outdated policies, and poor spending practices. If elected, I will make restoring accountability my top priority by implementing a formal purchase order system, updating financial policies, tracking and publicly reporting all spending, addressing audit findings with a clear corrective plan, and involving residents through open budget forums. Together, we can rebuild trust, ensure every dollar is spent wisely, and create a government that truly serves the people.

Stephanie Bassler: Affordability is the most important issue in Saugerties, and housing costs in particular are so impactful to our community. Ballooning real estate values, supply shortages, escalating construction costs, and smaller household sizes are all contributing factors. Our neighbors, friends, and families are being priced out of Saugerties. Young people can't afford to work here because they can't afford to find housing. Our older residents can't afford to stay here. We have to do more to help families stay, live and thrive in Saugerties. Our zoning code needs to be updated. Right now, our zoning code encourages builders to build affordable housing, which isn't enough. We need to require them to do so. Any project that builds more than six homes or apartments should be required to include affordable housing, or pay into a town managed fund that will support affordable homes. A comprehensive solution to

housing affordability also has to include zoning for clustered developments with generous green spaces, investing in public transit, expanding public utilities, and prioritizing housing rehabilitation.

Zach Horton: As a Town Councilman for the past four years, I've seen firsthand the challenges our residents are facing, and I believe the most critical issue in Saugerties right now is affordability. Individuals from all age groups are struggling with the cost of living, and far too many are facing the possibility of having to relocate. This issue can be addressed through responsible budgeting that eliminates wasteful and unnecessary spending, by pursuing state and federal grant funding to supplement local dollars for critical infrastructure projects, and by revisiting the local Short-Term Rental law to identify reasonable adjustments that balance community needs and property rights. While

these are not the only solutions, I believe these areas of focus would have a meaningful and positive impact on the affordability crisis currently burdening Saugerties residents.

Is there an issue in Saugerties you feel hasn't received enough attention from the Town Board, and how would you make it a priority if elected or re-elected?

Zach Horton: One of the biggest issues that my constituents' text and call me about on almost a daily basis that has been neglected is the importance of transparency and the decision-making process as a whole. Often, decisions seem to be made with little to no collective discussion and with minimal information being shared with members of leadership, as well as the public. I believe the best way to combat this is by continuing to host public discussions and public hearings, promptly post all information accurately to the

Town of Saugerties website, and by getting into the habit of hosting routine Town Board and department head meetings. I have been an advocate for increased transparency, and I will continue to advocate for further open communication.

Stephanie Bassler: The Town needs to do better with community engagement and communications, not just from the Town Board, but also committees, Zoning, Planning, and the Police Department, among others. As an example, having very impactful projects like the proposed zoning change at Winston Farm come to the community only through the state environmental review process is very limiting. With intentional forums for community involvement, we can create dialogue and discourse, which is so important to building trust, and reaching outcomes that reflect our collective vision of Saugerties.

Mike Sasso: Our town continues to face unresolved issues, from ignored complaints to unaddressed audit findings and weak accountability. My plan begins with a full operational review to ensure transparency, responsibility, and community trust. I will implement a public complaint tracking system, establish a Housing Task Force to tackle affordability, enforce follow-up on audit recommendations, strengthen public safety through coordinated initiatives, and introduce clear reporting structures, ethics training, and a Code of Conduct. This approach will create a transparent, accountable government that delivers real results for residents.

Bill Barr: Some years ago, the Town Board approved a resolution that was a Declaration of Climate Emergency. By approving it, the Town was stating that there is really no time to waste in taking measures to reduce carbon emissions, preserve carbon sinks (woodlands),

and increase progress toward an ecologically sustainable lifestyle. Since that time, the Town has made significant progress toward electrification of public buildings, purchase of electric vehicles, support for installation of private solar power, and many other measures. However, the Town does not seem sensitive to the essentiality of preserving trees, wetlands, and animal habitat. The emphasis on these matters, with the exception of its Conservation Advisory Commission, whose recommendations it has no requirement to follow, seems mostly to come from outside the Town government, from private individuals or organizations like Catskill Mountainkeeper or Riverkeeper. If elected, I hope to be a voice for the environment, to make sure that the Declaration of Climate Emergency informs our decisions. If not resolved by the time I take office, I would hope to use this voice in deciding how Winston Farm gets rezoned. I also feel

both the Town and the Board should review areas of open space that have environmental value and consider the use of conservation easements to protect those most worthy of it. A recent proposal to develop one of the last forested areas in the Village brought home the need for this. Once the land is purchased for development, it is illegal to alter its zoning. Creating more conservation easements will help Saugerties remain a community that its residents are invested in and preserve what we love about it.

The affordable housing crisis has affected both residents and local businesses, with employers reporting difficulty hiring because workers can't find homes nearby. What concrete steps should the town take to support more year-round, workforce-based housing? And how can the town of Saugerties and the Village work together on this?

Stephanie Bassler: With the housing affordability crisis very widespread, New York State and Ulster County have funding programs to help Towns and Villages address this need effectively. The NYS Pro-Housing Communities program and Ulster County's Housing Smart Communities program both offer funds to municipalities. Saugerties is a Pro-Housing Certified community, and is a housing Smart Community, and with those certifications we can access these significant grants. Unfortunately, the Village has not completed these certifications, and until it does so, it will not be able to partner fully with the Town on these opportunities. This grant-supported work typically includes a housing needs assessment, mapping housing opportunities, and proposing zoning changes. The zoning changes could include allowing multifamily housing in more zoning districts, adding more stringent requirements for

affordability in larger developments, and creating overlay zones.

Mike Sasso: Please refer to my response to Question 2.

Bill Barr: In talking to Saugertiesians, the most issue mentioned is affordability, and the main driver for that is the high cost of housing. So, though this is your third question, I will address it here, answering both. Developers and realty professionals suggest this is a supply and demand issue that can be solved through the increase in housing stock; i.e., building new homes. While that is partly true (for instance, we need more housing that is within reach of average earners), I see two other drivers leading to unaffordable housing: corporate investment in Saugerties housing, and the movement of houses from the long-term rental market into short-term rentals. While short-term rentals are an important part of the

tourism that Saugerties needs, I want the Town to work toward controlling it through permitting and zoning to avoid destroying the long-term rental market. This, in turn, will eventually discourage corporate investment in our real estate and the corresponding hyper-inflation of housing value. In the meantime, the Town should opt in to Good Cause Eviction to slow the transition of long-term rentals to the short-term market. Returning to the supply, I feel the Town should require at least 10 percent of new housing to be workforce housing. The rezoning of Winston Farm provides an excellent opportunity to do this. Finally, the Town and Village have duplicate permitting bodies that deal with zoning, as well as separate zoning law. I believe there are opportunities for achieving efficiencies and synergies by consolidating these activities, and there may even be grants available to make this happen.

Zach Horton: As previously stated, I believe

step one should be revisiting the Short-Term Rental Local Law and consider and consider implementing a cap on STRs, creating more opportunities for individuals to buy and remain Saugerties residents or to become Saugerties residents. The town should also properly focus on economic development by attracting new business, along the Kings Highway corridor just as an example. Additionally, I believe that responsible development and growth would positively impact the supply and demand issue for local housing. However, the town must remain strategic in these approaches, as development, growth, and new business attraction all come with their own costs to our local infrastructure and emergency services.

In recent months, Saugerties has been shaken by serious allegations of sexual abuse involving a former police officer and a school coach, and by questions about how those cases were handled. Residents

have called for greater transparency and accountability from both the town and the school district. What specific steps would you take as an elected official to rebuild public trust, ensure stronger oversight, and make local government more open in how it communicates with the community?

Bill Barr: As a father and a grandfather, I was personally sickened by these revelations. It is completely unacceptable that these behaviors were ignored or overlooked, as has been claimed by some. If that attitude existed within the police department or school, it should be ferreted out and removed, permanently. Investigations of these incidents are underway, and we will see where they lead. As a Town Councilmember, my responsibility would be oversight of the Police Department, and I was relieved to see that the police response, once the behavior was revealed, was swift and appropriate. In 2021, as a response to the

George Floyd killing by a policeman, the Town conducted the Saugerties Police Reform and Reinvention Committee, That report had a list of recommendations for the Police Department to implement. I would support a review of those recommendations and implementing any outstanding ones that are relevant. I am confident that Chief Swart will take appropriate action. Finally, Saugerties must look at the salary structure for the police force and check it against neighboring communities. It needs to have the highest quality police force that it can afford.

Zach Horton: The Town of Saugerties elected leadership and the leadership within the Police Department, must continue to revamp its approach to background checks and hiring. Likewise, when an issue of any magnitude, not just one sexual in nature, presents itself, we must continue to seek assistance from our outside law enforcement partners. This will

allow for an independent investigation and further ensure the integrity of the investigation process. We also need to increase communication between the town and the school district. Though we operate independently of each other, that is no excuse for not communicating on any all issues, especially when it comes to the safety and security of our children. We must create time to host joint meetings and engage the public in open and honest discussion. This will be a focus of mine with a second term.

Stephanie Bassler: I have met with the Chief of Police to learn more about his leadership during this difficult time, and was glad to learn about his careful attention to restoring trust in the community. We reviewed the recommendations from the Police Reform Report from 2021, most of which have been implemented. However, there is no clear plan under the current leadership to create a

community liaison position or develop any form of community review process. The Town should prioritize creating some form of citizen-police liaison, which will do much to restore badly-needed transparency and trust.

Mike Sasso: Please refer to my response to Question 2.

Cell signal has been an issue in the town for as long as there have been cell phones.

Despite the ongoing need for better service, during that time, there has been pushback from residents as to where cell towers should and shouldn't be built. How do you think the town should approach this issue moving forward?

Mike Sasso: To expand cellular connectivity in Saugerties responsibly, I will promote a community-guided approach that improves service while preserving the town's scenic beauty and property values. This includes

forming a Community Advisory Board to review proposals, encouraging camouflaged tower designs, prioritizing placement in suitable zones, partnering transparently with landowners, and ensuring public involvement and education throughout the process.

Bill Barr: Cell phones require towers to transmit their signals, and this is a line-of-sight transmission. As a Council member, I will work to place cell phone towers in the most unobtrusive locations possible. The difficulty in accomplishing this often lies with the service providers being unwilling to consider the Town's views. This is a problem that can be addressed by competition. By increasing the number of service providers, we can increase the options available to the Town and optimize tower placement. More education of the public and transparency in resolution of disputes, actually helping the public understand the options available, could lead to more favorable

outcomes as well.

Zach Horton: I believe enhancing cell service is critical to our infrastructure and our communications for not only our residents and businesses, but our emergency services. The town needs to continue to engage homeowners in the areas where these projects are being proposed and carefully consider their concerns. As a homeowner in Saugerties, I would not want to walk out of my backdoor and find myself staring up at monstrous tower.

Throughout the town, there are several parcels of town-owned land and land where there existing solar farms, that could be viable locations for these types of projects. I believe that these avenues should be fully exhausted and the least invasive option that appeases nearby residents while allowing for successful project completion, be selected.

Stephanie Bassler: Cellular companies have

an incredible amount of power in locating cell towers despite community objections due to their status as an essential service. With more and more people relying on cellular service for their connectivity needs, there is a real need for dependable cellular service. There is a lot of distrust of the cellular companies' data that they use to justify locations. Saugerties should coordinate with the state and county to get legislative backing in standing up for Town concerns, and also access appropriate resources for the review of these very technical and complicated projects.