

STATE SENATE DISTRICT 7

QUESTION 1: **CANDIDATE DONNA BERGSTROM:**

Please provide a brief statement about who you are and why you are running for the office of State Senator.

My name is Donna Bergstrom. I am running for State Senate District 7. I consider my interest in serving as an elected official to be an extension of my life-long commitment to our country, our constitution, and our freedoms – freedoms I proudly defended while serving our nation for over 20 years as a US Marine Corps Reserve Intelligence Officer, retiring in 2010 as a Lieutenant Colonel. Having been born and raised in northeastern Minnesota, I have remained committed to this region's welfare. After graduating from Carlton High School, I completed my undergraduate degree in Political Science at the UMN-Twin Cities. In addition to military service, I have worked for the consulting firm Booz|Allen|Hamilton and owned my own small business. I believe in life-long learning, and have recently obtained my Master of Jurisprudence degree from Loyola University-Chicago School of Law in Children's Law and Policy. I love Minnesota, and retain my commitment to the welfare of our state and its citizens. As an American Indian, I understand the sense of estrangement many minorities feel towards the political process. I want to give strength to the voices of those who feel marginalized, and will bring a fresh perspective and a new voice, inclusive of our values and priorities. A healthy democratic process makes space for divergent views, and is strengthened by creating solutions by working with those affected by the practices of the policy when implemented. I believe we need to work on being more inclusive in our politics.

CANDIDATE ERIK SIMONSON:

Hello! My name is Erik Simonson, and I am the DFL endorsed candidate for Minnesota's Senate District 7. I have represented the western portions of Duluth for the past four years in the House of Representatives, and when Senator Reinert announced he would not seek re-election in 2016 to the Senate, I decided to make a run for that seat. I've worked hard on behalf of Duluth and our great state over the past four years, and would love the opportunity to carry that very same work ethic into the Minnesota Senate!

Duluth needs a strong and experienced leader in the Minnesota Senate that will work to bring resolve to many ongoing issues: Issues such as a comprehensive transportation package, reducing our dependence on fossil fuels, racial and gender equity, and a stronger public education system.

Duluth has many people living in poverty, many people working 2 and 3 jobs to make ends meet, and far too many people who still remain homeless. We need smart and strategic investments and policies to make our community stronger.

And we need legislators going forward with the skills of negotiating. We've seen an unwillingness to compromise between parties, and those actions are putting out entire state at risk. I bring those exact skills to the table, and I am committed to getting things done!

It is these reasons and more, that drive me to be involved, and they align with the core values and beliefs I want to carry to the Minnesota Senate!

QUESTION 2: CANDIDATE DONNA BERGSTROM:

What should state government do about the growing economic disparity between the poor, the middle class and the wealthy?

Economic disparity is a legitimate and important issue. Socialization of the economy, however, is not the answer. An important aspect to focus on is the graduation of Minnesota's High School students. Increasing the graduation rates of students has an economic impact, as students with a degree have better access to employment opportunities along with access to advanced schooling options. As a member of the State Senate, I will work to improve high school graduation rates among the minority populations so that they leave high school on a better footing that can lead to better job prospects and higher educational opportunities. Cultures of despondency, especially in minority communities need to be addressed, and improved educational opportunities are a vital first step. Having worked in the past six years primarily with the American Indian population in Duluth, I have witnessed first-hand the problems experienced by generations of American Indians who often are overlooked or marginalized from the dominant culture. Removing barriers for all people to access good jobs is a critical component for regaining economic vitality in Minnesota. As a Veteran, I also believe we can make progress in streamlining regulations for certifying similar skills obtained in the military to those in the economic sector.

CANDIDATE ERIK SIMONSON:

After four years in the legislature, I am even more convinced that two of the most significant contributing factors to the economic disparity include lack of access to public education and a lack of access to adequate and affordable housing. I have seen too many examples of poor families who cyclically remain poor because they cannot find a decent job. And in order to get such a job, education is often times a critical component that too many simply cannot afford.

Ask nearly any individual who has been unemployed, or underemployed, and is struggling to find work, or fighting to achieve a higher education and they will tell you the most important factor contributing to any chance of success is a place to call home.

I am very proud of the work we began during the 2013-14 legislative session. Work that included raising the minimum wage, raising income taxes on the top 2% of wage earners, and historical investments in education and affordable housing.

How do we fix this? We need to have the political will to ensure every Minnesota has access to free public education, from pre-K through high school. And yes, we must find the means to ensure every single graduate from public high school in Minnesota has the opportunity to obtain an associate's degree, free of charge.

If we want to close this gap – we will need to lift up those at the bottom. And that will have to include contributions from those at the top.

QUESTION 3: CANDIDATE DONNA BERGSTROM:

What are the most important things that should be done to improve the region's economy?

Minnesota is among the highest taxed states in the nation, both personal and corporate. While some taxes are obviously needed for essential services and public welfare, more taxes are not the answer. Attention to state tax rates is key to understanding the impact on our local economy. In addition, the sometimes overly burdensome regulatory environment in which small businesses are forced to operate must be addressed if the region's economy is to improve. Small businesses are the backbone of our region's economy. Manufacturing, farming and taconite industries have been hard-hit and those areas are struggling to make gains. The layoffs on the Iron Range impact the vitality of the region, and the lives of families who live in there. Tax relief for businesses and job creators is an option that will allow for more capital to be available for investment, equipment purchases, business expansion and added employees. The budget decisions made in the upcoming legislative sessions need to measure whether the decision supports or hurts job growth. My interest is in ensuring Minnesota is a viable option for new businesses, and helps promote business growth.

CANDIDATE ERIK SIMONSON:

With respect to our regional economy, we first will need to see our various forms of local governments come together and agree that by working collectively toward a sustainable future, we can actually make significant progress. For too long, our region has suffered due to conflicting visions of what a viable forecast might be.

There ought to be no question that each portion of our region can play a supporting role, or a dissenting role in economic development. We must find a way to work together. Working in silo's may provide short term relief, or support the status quo, but we can and should do better.

Beyond that, diversification will be the key to any form of economic improvements. There are significant portions of our economy that are cyclical in nature, and diversifying beyond the historical norm may help in offsetting the cycles as well as adding economic growth.

We should be encouraging municipal and county governments to work together to identify region wide solutions. Diversification is all too often ignored, or thought of as the "they will come to us" solution. But in reality, and considering the impact of today's global market opportunities, our region needs to be the inspiration of emerging opportunities, and not the typical response based approach we see too often.

I am more than willing to work across these boundaries, it also takes willing partners in all forms of government to make a true impact.

QUESTION 4: CANDIDATE DONNA BERGSTROM:

What do you believe state government should do to limit the impact of global climate change?

Parts of Minnesota are economically dependent upon industries that are considered major contributors to climate change. This is especially true on the Iron Range, where proposals to mine copper and other minerals may threaten the fragile environmental conditions that Minnesotans value. Providing jobs for the population of that region is important, but more attention needs to be focused on economic diversification so that short-term mining projects with long-term environmental effects are not forced upon the state. The United States needs a vibrant steel industry for both economic and national security reasons, and taconite mining on the Range is a vital part of that process, but economic diversification is important for long-term environmental and economic reasons. Minnesota can also address the issue of global climate change through economic incentives for the use of more fuel-efficient vehicles. The Pollution Control Agency monitors the quality of Minnesota's land, air and water, along with developing and enforcing rules to protect health standards. The PCA oversees the federal Clean Power Plan aimed at reducing carbon dioxide pollution from power plants. Measures such as these ensure Minnesota is a partner in limiting the impact of global climate change.

CANDIDATE ERIK SIMONSON:

The State of Minnesota and Governor Dayton have been leaders in our nation regarding this issue. Governor Dayton has directed that Minnesota work to meet and even exceed the newest national air quality standards, despite the issue being stayed by the courts at the national level.

But we can do so much more. The argument that accelerated climate change isn't real should be retired once and for all. The fact is, the legislature ought to be even more aggressive when it comes to implementing standards to reduce carbon dioxide generation, renewable energy standards, and incentivizing change toward net zero behavior. Coal cannot be part of our energy company's portfolio as we look into the future, rather a renewed effort on generating clean energy in Minnesota should be on the horizon. Minnesotan's and its energy companies send billions of dollars out of state each year to purchase energy – imagine the impact if we could keep even just one billion here – spent within our own borders?

The State should be working with municipalities and counties to help them reduce their carbon footprint, and that includes not just generation methods but consumption of energy as well. And of course our own MNSCU and university buildings ought to be the models when it comes to energy efficient behaviors.

Our future in slowing climate change will include a multitude of approaches. From energy generation sources, to building efficiency changes, to recycling and greener transportation methods, Minnesota can and should be a leader in this effort.

QUESTION 5: CANDIDATE DONNA BERGSTROM:

What should the state government's top three priorities be in setting a sound energy policy?

A sound energy policy would include: reducing dependence on foreign oil by increasing domestic options; increase conservation and efficiency; and, support research and development in technology for energy options. Short-term gains could include financial incentives for more fuel-efficient vehicles that will reduce fossil fuel consumption. I also support expansion of energy sources that do not contribute to global climate change, including nuclear power and, when feasible, solar and wind. With each option comes an unintended consequence, such as in the use of wind power that threatens migratory birds wind-turbine farms. Diversity of energy options will also help businesses and consumers select the energy option that works best for them, and is possibly more cost effective for them. Government policies need to be inclusive of efforts that also streamline regulations in order to ensure reliable and affordable energy is available for all consumers.

CANDIDATE ERIK SIMONSON:

1. Bring all the interested and affected parties together to be a part of creating Minnesota's next steps. Mandates are rarely popular with utilities, but if it is made clear at the outset what the absolute goals are, at the very least everyone will have opportunity to weigh in. Beyond that, the initiative will be considered by the legislature, but work done on the front end often goes a long way toward successful implementation.
2. Establish clear, and aggressive goals toward carbon use reductions, and an increased renewable energy standard. If we truly want to make the necessary impact and slow the accelerated climate change, then we have to have the political courage to put into law real goals that will provide that desired impact. The fact is the technology is there, or at least emerging, and if we jump on it now Minnesota has a real opportunity to be a national leader in this area.
3. Develop incentives for private homeowners who want to be a part of the solution. There ought not be significant financial barriers for anyone who wants to be a part of the solution. We also need to look at further funding for municipalities and other public entities and their waste water treatment plant upgrades. There is no question that doing the right thing is going to cost money. And by spreading the cost across the entire state we can hopefully limit the impact significantly.

QUESTION 6: CANDIDATE DONNA BERGSTROM:

What should be done to ensure that every citizen has the ability to vote and have their vote counted without undue barriers?

I take the issue of being able to vote very seriously, and believe that voting is a vital component of our democracy. When the 26th Amendment of the Constitution was ratified, the nation ushered in the vote of the 18-21 year olds. They brought a new voice, a new perspective. We can ensure voter access and voter identification. Equating a requirement for voters to prove their identity at polling places as an unduly burdensome obstacle is un-American. Every citizen who meets basic, common sense criteria, such as proof of identity and no record of felonious criminal behavior, is free to vote. We require proof of identification in this country for a passport, for a job, for medical care, for a fishing license, for operation of a motor vehicle, for cashing a check, but not for voting. The basic efforts government can make to ensure it is “one person, one vote” are required to ensure a strong democracy. Technology can assist in ways that were not possible in the past. In addition, taking a look at expanding voting from one day to several has increased voter turn out in other states. Looking at what the barriers are to voting is important for our state and its citizens.

CANDIDATE ERIK SIMONSON:

First, we need to continue to push back against suppressive measures such as voter ID. We all know, or should know, that these types of initiatives are nothing more than disguised attempts to restrict voters from participating.

We have made significant headway in the area of early voting recently, and the legislature should continue those efforts. No excuse absentee voting should be the way all elections are administered, and every single lawmaker ought to be seeking ways to make voting easier, not more difficult.

They say the best offense is a good defense, and this is an area where that will be critically important in the coming years. For the average citizen who carries an identification card in their pocket, voter ID laws seem common sense. But as I can attest to, there are many citizens who do not fit that mold, and it is those we must work to protect.

In addition, Minnesota should work towards automatic voter registration. I would like to see registration be automatic with each driver's license application, and with graduation from high school. We will have to work with other entities to accomplish this, but I believe it is effective policy and will hopefully encourage voting and more participation.

Lastly, education, education, and more education on the critical importance of voting. This is a personal challenge we should all assume, and work to ensure our friends and families all understand the importance of the right to vote.

QUESTION 7: CANDIDATE DONNA BERGSTROM:

Please explain why you do or do not think it is important to reduce the role of money in American elections.

I would prefer to reduce the role of money in American elections, but the United States Supreme Court has repeatedly determined otherwise. Financial contributions to political campaigns and causes are considered a legitimate expression of free speech, and both major political parties benefit from that situation. At the end of the day, however, an enlightened electorate can overcome the oft-times degrading effect of money on campaigns. Money, more than anything, buys publicity for the candidate in question. That publicity, whether in the form of radio, television and “social network” advertisements, or through direct mailings, is only as effective as the public allows. An informed citizenry remains the best protection against the influence of money in political campaigns. A separate issue is the concern among most of the public that campaign donations guarantee access to elected officials and even to favorable outcomes in the legislative process. That is the more serious problem, but is often misunderstood. Money, as often as not, flows to politicians whose positions on issues already coincide with those of the donors. In other words, it’s not a quid pro quo so much as a situation in which donors contribute to those politicians with whom they are in agreement.

CANDIDATE ERIK SIMONSON:

One only needs to spend about 5 minutes watching television in an election year to see the tremendous impact of outside monies on elections. Since Citizens United, more and more money from unidentifiable sources has been pouring into elections at all levels of government.

Much of the outside money is spent on misleading voters. This takes real time away from the actual candidate’s schedules, who must work to counter these attacks with often times little or no real resources. I assure you – that is time much better spent interacting with voters personally!

Elections ought to be publically funded, and Citizens United ought to be over turned. This would allow for a more civil and factual debate amongst candidates, more direct contact with voters, and eliminate a large percentage of the negative campaigning.

Studies have shown that these advertising attacks are in many cases influential. It is highly unfortunate when a good candidate loses only because they were outspent, but it is even more devastating when they lose due to misleading or false attacks.

Corporations often have deep pockets, and independent expenditures are easy to pull off. We need to fight to put stronger disclosure laws in place so everyone can see exactly who is funding what.

Isn’t it ironic that I as a candidate have to publically disclose the source of every \$200 donation to my campaign, but an outside entity can spend as much as they want independently without disclosing a thing? Something wrong there!

QUESTION 8: CANDIDATE DONNA BERGSTROM:

How can state government, in collaboration with other levels of government, provide an equitable, quality public education for all children pre-K through grade 12?

Minnesota has been a leader and champion for quality education for many years, and was the first state to pass Charter School legislation in 1991 that set the stage for innovative labs of learning that were to be shared with the traditional public schools. Additionally, open enrollment is an option that gives parents and students the right to enroll in a public school of choice, including online schools. All day kindergarten is funded statewide, providing another option to create equitable access to education. State government can help to ensure that all students enjoy equitable access to public education facilities by ensuring that considerations other than local tax bases determine quality of education. State government can reform legislation so that the school funding formula is more equitable across the state, rather than the current situation where some school districts receive more funding per student than other districts. I support giving parents who have children better served by non-public schools a tuition tax credit as doing so reduces the burdens of the families and, the cost to the state is decreased because the student is not attending a public school. I support holding staff and administration accountable for systems that best reflect how to achieve improved student performance, particularly concerning American Indian students, who currently graduate at rates of about 50% statewide – making Minnesota 2nd worse in the nation. Public schools should reflect 21st century learning for our students.

CANDIDATE ERIK SIMONSON:

Most politicians will agree that public education is one of the most important, and core functions of state government. And I also believe that many of us now understand the empirical evidence in support of pre-K. What remains is a baffling question of how do we put additional and adequate funding into the formula.

Personally, I think many of the challenges in our public schools currently are a result of inadequate funding. There are not always enough teachers to provide individual attention. There are often not enough counselors to deal with today's emerging social challenges. Important life based programs are being eliminated.

Minnesota is at a public school funding cross roads. We have to either generate new revenues to put into the school districts, and allow them the opportunity to do their work, or we have to reform how we currently allocate revenues.

The problem with adding money without increasing revenues (reform) is that it means reductions somewhere else in the state budget. And there is just not an opportunity to do that. Which leaves us with the need for new revenues. If education truly is the most important priority, then I want to work with public school teachers and the districts to identify a solution, and then implement it. There is no magical solution, and in reality it will be a huge challenge, but doing nothing will only lead to further degradation of our public schools.

QUESTION 9: CANDIDATE DONNA BERGSTROM:

How can state government, in collaboration with other levels of government, help address racial and cultural divides in public safety?

Addressing racial and cultural divides in public safety requires actions on both sides of the equation. Law enforcement agencies can better train their personnel, while aggrieved communities can better address some of the underlying causes of the problems currently harming those communities, including drugs and violent crime. State government can help in both areas. Increased funding—to the extent that budgetary deficiencies are a part of the problem in fielding officers better prepared to police ethnically-diverse or minority neighborhoods—can help to alleviate the problem. More important, however, is the need to address the underlying problems endemic to some communities. State-level attention to these problems can help to illuminate societal ills that breed discontent and violence, and that leave police officers feeling threatened. Addressing the problems of poverty, substance abuse, and violence, however, has been a major focus of government at all levels for many decades (Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, for example). We did not arrive at our current situation overnight, and we will not correct these problems overnight. Improving educational and employment opportunities, which usually goes hand-in-hand, is an essential first step, and the state certainly has a role to play in ensuring positive outcomes.

CANDIDATE ERIK SIMONSON:

Step one: Admit that black lives matter. And remember, it is not to say that only black lives matter, rather that it is time to believe that black lives do matter also.

This is a real problem in Minnesota, as it is in many areas of our country. The facts do not lie. White Minnesotans do not make up the majority of our homeless. White Minnesotans do not make up the majority of our prison or jail populations. White Minnesotans do not make up the majority of our most economically challenged communities.

White Minnesotans do, however, make up the majority of the upper economic and social classes. And they do make up the majority of elected officials. And they do make up the majority of our graduating classes, be it high school or higher education. All of these glaring comparisons lead to distrust, anger, frustration and continued confrontations.

The state needs to put adequate funding into increasing opportunities for people of color, whether it be in ensuring educational opportunities, or small business loans, or by simply working to ensure adequate housing is available. This should be a top priority if we truly want to stop what is happening at its source.

But I think the most important point is that decisions about the future opportunities for people of color cannot be made by the privileged few. Rather we need to listen, and hear solutions from those directly affected. Key word? Listen.

QUESTION 10: CANDIDATE DONNA BERGSTROM:

In your opinion, what are the most important challenges facing our region and how do you propose to address these challenges?

There are a number of challenges facing our region, including those mentioned above. One of the most pressing is the heroin epidemic ravaging our neighborhoods. Duluth has a very serious problem with substance abuse, and the resurgence of heroin, as a “drug of choice,” is a dismal sign of the depths to which we have descended as a society. Drug and alcohol abusers regularly occupy limited space in hospital emergency rooms. The “war on drugs” has not been successful, yet attacking the trade in substances like heroin must remain a priority, and that means working with other states (especially Illinois), the medical community, and the federal government. Local government needs to be forthcoming with the public with respect to the scale of this problem, and begin efforts to curb the problem with multiple measures, including educating the public on the dangers of addiction. Another, related challenge involves the shortage of adequate facilities for mental health patients. Along with increased funding for substance abuse treatment and detention centers, the region must address the shortage of infrastructure for treating the mentally ill. The economic situation on the Iron Range must be addressed. Northeastern Minnesota can support mining and the environment. Minnesota has taxpayer-funded agencies to oversee the mining industries activities. Taconite mining is eminently supportable, and I will continue to support such activities.

CANDIDATE ERIK SIMONSON:

1. Climate change.
See above responses.
2. Economic diversification.
See above responses.
3. Racial and gender equity.

I touched on racial inequalities in a previous question, but we cannot ignore the fact that women are also still facing challenges only due to gender. All people, regardless of gender, color, religious choice, or any other socio-economic factor should be denied the opportunity to advance at the same pace, at the same level, and with the same level of benefit and respect.

4. Labor and environmental harmony.

As the debate continues over the potential mining in our region of copper, nickel and other precious metals, the rhetoric between opposing groups is reaching an unhealthy level for communities to sustain. The fact is we need jobs in our region. I believe strongly in unionized workforces and their positive impacts on the middle class and society as a whole. I also believe just as strongly in clean water, air, and sustainable environmental resource policy. As individuals, we will never agree on everything, and we must learn to respect the opinions of the opposing side. Regardless of the outcome of this process, we must work together in a collaborative fashion to accomplish a better, stronger Minnesota. If these mines end up not being permitted, then we must double our efforts to diversify our economy. And if they are permitted, then we must work equally as hard to ensure they are operated safely.