

Two candidates running for South District Supervisor

Emma Martin

Jul 12, 2023

South District voters will choose between two women for the open board of supervisors seat in November's general election; both are mothers and lifelong Nelson County residents heavily involved in their communities.

Local veterinarian Jessica Ligon won the Nelson County Republican Committee's nomination for the seat in May and has talked about the successful comeback of the Lovington Veterinary Hospital under her leadership. Ligon wants to improve transparency and communication between the board and community, curtail spending and make improvements to public schools

"I feel that we need more accountability, more measurable results, and I really feel that we need more transparency. There are a lot of decisions made behind closed doors," Ligon said in an interview.

Her opponent is Independent Mary Kathryn Allen, current Nelson County Planning Commission chair and regional director of the Blue Ridge EMS Council. Allen thinks sports teach children important life lessons, and she wants to see the county expand sports and recreation programs for youth, while maintaining "fiscal responsibility."

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“I am very much a youth advocate, whether it’s in the schools, or whether it is youth sports and recreation. People say children are our future all the time, but they really are and, as a parent, I feel very passionate about making sure we do our best to set them up for success ...” Allen said in an interview.

Current South District Supervisor Skip Barton confirmed he is not seeking re-election for health reasons.

Allen has worked in the emergency medical services field for 26 years and said she started as a volunteer in Nelson and Amherst counties.

“I just have a love for public service, period. I grew up in a public service family ...”

She said her father, the late John Dixon, worked in law enforcement for more than 34 years, in Nelson, Amherst and Buckingham counties, and her mother worked as an emergency room nurse and ran the medical department at the Buckingham Correctional Center.

Allen unsuccessfully ran for the South District Board of Supervisors seat in 2007 as an Independent against Joe Dan Johnson, Larry Saunders and Johnny Ponton. Johnson won that year.

“... [A]nd then after that I just decided that I needed to concentrate a little more on my family at that time and working and establishing myself in the county. I wanted people to believe in who I was and so I felt like showing them who I was by being involved,” she said.

Allen has served on the Nelson County Planning Commission since 2012 and is the commission representative to the board of zoning appeals. She was also heavily involved in the county’s youth baseball program for about five years until the program closed during the pandemic.

Ligon grew up on a commercial beef and sheep operation. Her father was the local veterinarian and a volunteer firefighter and Ligon's great-aunt helped establish the county's health department.

She said "... it wasn't until I had kids that I really took a look at the state of things." With a "great team" at the Lovingston and Amherst vet offices, "I think it's just time for change and I have the energy to do it now. And really it's not my goal to throw money at problems, it's to go find the problem and fix it kind of thing."

Ligon said she's observed Lovingston "dying," small businesses closing, "and a huge change from industry to tourism being our bread and butter. Which is fine, but we're about to go into a recession and we're relying on millennials to come drink ... and we're going to have to start repaying loans back. We're taking on a large amount of debt and haven't really had to step up and pay for that yet ..."

She said she worries about the county's spending not "bracing for that failure."

Allen said her priorities for the board are, "Schools, economic development whether that is growth of business or growth of infrastructure to support what our district needs and what our county needs. Housing, and how that's going to work with the comprehensive plan ... I want a recreational complex here and I think there are small communities that have built that and I think we need to figure out how we can make that happen here."

She called county schools the "backbone of the community."

"Just like our children are, and we need to support our school system. We need fiscal responsibility at the county level in order to make sure that we are providing what our community needs and wants."

Ligon's children are approaching school-age. She'd like to send them to Tye River Elementary School but has concerns about the elementary school and the school division, Nelson County Public Schools, which she'd like to address as South District Supervisor.

She said Tye River has “huge problems” with literacy rates, and reading and comprehension skills among students, adding “it’s been a problem for 20 years and hasn’t been addressed or fixed and I would like to see something happen.” Ligon also said the division has problems with “chronic absenteeism,” and she doesn’t think it’s providing sufficient college preparation and vocational training.

Detailed assessments of Virginia public schools and school divisions are available on the Virginia Department of Education’s School Quality Profiles website, **schoolquality.virginia.gov**.

The website’s data for the 2021-22 school year showed 35% of the overall NCPS student body were chronically absent or missed 10% or more of school days.

Tye River’s percentage of students passing English reading state tests was 11 percentage points below the state average for 2021-22, and the school’s percentage of students passing English writing ranked 4 percentage points below the state average. Meanwhile, Tye River students’ math testing results were at state average, and history and science evaluations were six percentage points above the state average passing rate.

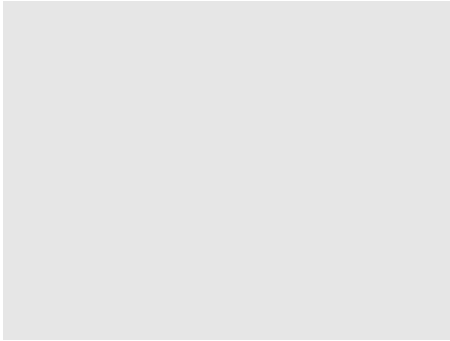
“I have nothing to gain by running for the board of supervisors. I want to be there to support not only my district, obviously my family, but I want to be a part of the community,” Allen said.

Her final message to voters: “You can talk to me. Even if we don’t agree on a topic you can still talk to me and reach out to me. Give me your opinion, that’s what I want. I’m open to discussion. I do not have a closed door policy ... I’m big on compromise because even though there are times that you stand up for what you believe, compromise is what will usually benefit what you need.”

Ligon said she’d want to run Nelson more like a businesses, and as a business owner and manager she’s a “big delegator” who encourages her employees to continue learning.

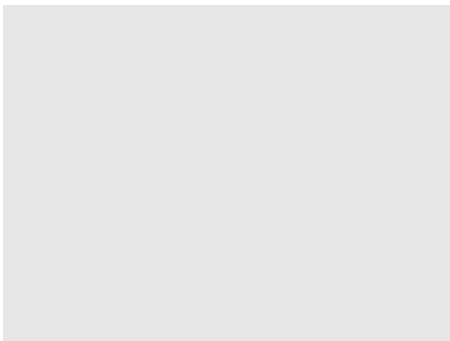
“I’ve worked for a lot of people and a lot of different management styles, and I have learned a lot from all of them. I think if you show your people that you’re going to work as hard as they do, they’re going to put in the effort,” Ligon said.

“I really am willing to work with people, and if they have things they think the community needs to do, I’m really open to hear about it.”



Allen

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Ligon

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By Emma_Martin

Democratic candidates for 11th district seat stump in Nelson

Emma Martin

May 10, 2023



Delegate Sally Hudson, D-Charlottesville, and Senator Creigh Deeds, D-Bath, both vying for the newly-formed 11th Lovingston.

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A Democratic candidate forum April 28 pitted seniority and experience against newcomer energy, with two candidates at different stages in their political careers vying for Nelson County's vote in the newly formed 11th Senate District.

Incumbent Creigh Deeds, D-Bath, has served as the county's state senator since 2001 in the 25th District, that up until 2021 included all of Nelson County, Charlottesville, and much of Albemarle, part of Rockbridge and all of Alleghany and Bath counties.

With redistricting, the newly formed 11th Senate District includes Charlottesville and all of Nelson, Albemarle and Amherst counties, and a piece of Louisa County.

Challenger Sally Hudson, D-Charlottesville, is the first woman to represent the 57th District, which includes all of Charlottesville and part of Albemarle County, in the Virginia House of Delegates.

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Deeds' political roots run deep; his grandfather was the chairman of the Democratic committee in Deeds' native Bath County during the Great Depression, and he has represented Virginia voters in the House of Delegates and then the state Senate for a total of 32 years.

"If I return to the Senate I'll be no lower than the second senior Democrat in the Senate of Virginia," Deeds said.

"On the Senate Finance Committee I'm not only on the committee, I'm the chair of a subcommittee. I'm on the Budget Conference Committee. I'm in a position to get things done. If you throw away that seniority you start all over again, that's the way the process works."

Hudson works as an economist and teaches statistics at the University of Virginia, and is finishing out her second term as a Virginia state legislator.

“I think seniority is one of the many things that can help legislators get things done, but it’s not the only thing. I think insight and ingenuity matter. I think creativity and hustle matter. I think communication skills and collaboration matter ... I know how to push my party to get work done on reproductive rights, on climate change, on economic equity, even when those ideas haven’t yet moved into the mainstream,” Hudson said.

Local moderators’ questions were an opportunity for the two candidates to show Nelson voters where they stand on the issues.

Gun safety

“I will be honest, my thoughts on this have evolved a lot over the years. I grew up on a farm, I grew up probably learning to shoot a rifle about the same time I learned to read a book,” Deeds said.

He talked about introducing two pieces of legislation related to firearms this year, one bill that would have barred the sale, possession and manufacture of guns defined as “assault firearms,” and another that would have strengthened gun laws on college campuses, after a Nov. 13 shooting at the University of Virginia killed three student-athletes. Neither bill made it past the House of Delegates.

Talking about the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings: “I was in my freshman dorm room when we got the news from Virginia Tech, and so when I had a chance when I was 31 years old to vote to ban assault weapons I didn’t hesitate, but I don’t think that’s the only vote on guns that you should explain to people in your history,” Hudson said to Deeds, referring to his 2020 vote against a proposed assault weapons ban, which Deeds said was too broadly defined, and as an attorney he said he had concerns the ban was not constitutional.

Hudson challenged Deeds on other votes, including to repeal the state's one-per-month limit on handgun purchases in 2012. Deeds was one of two Democrats to vote with Republicans to eliminate the cap, according to The Washington Post.

"I don't know what you think the constitutional issues are there, but from my plain text reading the Second Amendment protects your right to bear arms not to buy them in bulk," Hudson said.

Public education

Asked about parents' role in public schools' curriculum, both candidates criticized Gov. Glenn Youngkin and Republican legislators' focus on parental oversight in the classroom.

"I think it's high time that we put the teachers in the driver's seat of public education policy and stop trying to politicize some theory that teachers don't care about making families meaningful partners in their kids' education," Hudson said.

"Every single day they [parents] ought to be engaged but the movement the governor's promoting is all politics and it's just too bad. It takes the focus away from where it should be and that's making sure that our kids get the best education possible," Deeds answered.

Abortion rights, mental health

Both candidates had opportunities to speak on issues they've prioritized. Asked about reproductive health access, Hudson talked about a bill she introduced in 2021 to remove the state prohibition on insurance coverage for abortions: "... because I knew friends who had encountered that problem, and was told by leaders in my own party that they weren't ready to talk about paying for abortion — that we were going to protect reproductive rights, that we rattle off the talking points of pro-choice politicians, but we weren't actually willing to talk about the touchy stuff when it comes to protecting abortion access ..."

She also introduced a bill in 2023 to secure emergency contraception for sexual assault survivors in Virginia hospitals that was ultimately defeated in the House.

“... because right now if you show up needing that treatment, and there’s a doctor on duty who personally, morally or religiously objects to emergency contraception, they can deny you that care because it’s their belief and not your body from their perspective.”

Deeds became a champion for mental health reform after his son Gus died of suicide in 2013. He talked about developing relationships with Republicans and Democrats to get mental health bills passed and about funds in this year’s state budget to address Community Service Board employee vacancies, to create psychiatric residencies and for long-term supportive housing, among other measures. A state budget hasn’t been finalized yet, but is expected to include a record amount of funding for youth mental health services, according to Virginia Public Media.

“Mental health reform is very much like eating an elephant: you take a big bite, you feel like you’ve accomplished a lot — and we have over the last few years. We’ve invested on an annual basis more than \$200 million a year in mental health, but ... the system is so chronically dysfunctional and underfunded that we have so much more to do,” Deeds said.

Climate change and clean energy

Hudson called climate change an “existential threat.”

“The only question is whether we are willing to make progress at the pace that science demands and the planet requires, and that is clear to anybody who is going to be around to bear the consequences of our slow action on the climate crisis,” she said.

“I think it’s very important that our clean energy transition leave no community behind ... it’s important that we fund clean energy at a fair price in a way that’s accessible to everybody who needs it,” Hudson added, saying the 11th Senate District and communities such as Nelson should lead the effort.

“If we want to continue to exist on this planet we have to reduce our carbon output,” Deeds said.

“We are moving toward a renewable economy, the question is how can we speed up what we’re doing.”

In closing, Deeds called himself “an effective, pragmatic, progressive legislator.”

Hudson talked about how campaigning for Tom Perriello in the 2017 gubernatorial primary inspired her to get involved in politics, “... because somebody was working hard for my vote and was trying to tell all of us that we could imagine a new way in Richmond, that communities like ours especially have a very special job to do to set a higher bar and push the pace for progress on a whole lot of issues that have been left on the back burner for far too long ...”

Early voting in the Senate primary election runs until June 17. Primary election day is June 20.

By Emma_Martin

ALERT FEATURED TOP STORY

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"Support our own:" Nelson, state officials look to extend line of duty benefits to families of private officers

Emma_Martin

Jun 22, 2023

In Virginia, an officer with a private police department must meet all of the same training requirements as other state law enforcement officers. But if that private police officer is killed in the line of duty, their family is not eligible for the same benefits.

In light of Wintergreen Police Officer Mark Christopher "Chris" Wagner II's death in a shooting June 16, Nelson County officials and state legislators are looking to change that statute.

Wagner, 31, was the first law enforcement officer to respond to a residence on Arrowhead Lane in the Wintergreen community of Nelson County on Friday, after an emergency call came to the Wintergreen Police Department about two people being assaulted. Wagner encountered Maryland man Daniel M. Barmak in the woods and a struggle ensued over Wagner's department-issued handgun, according to Virginia State Police.



Wagner

Wagner was shot and killed, and Barmak also suffered gunshot wounds, state police reported.

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Barmak, 23, currently is charged with one count each of aggravated murder of a law enforcement officer, use of a firearm in commission of a felony, drug possession and malicious wounding. His preliminary hearing is scheduled for Oct. 4 in Nelson General District Court.

Area police departments quickly responded with public support for Wagner, his family and the Wintergreen Police Department. Virginia State Police joined Wintergreen Fire and Rescue and Nelson County Sheriff's Department personnel on Tuesday to pay homage to Officer Wagner along an overpass over Interstate 64 in Afton, as state police vehicles transported his body home to Stuart's Draft along the interstate. Photos on the sheriff's department's Facebook page show law enforcement personnel saluting along the overpass next to an American flag hung from a Wintergreen Fire and Rescue fire truck's ladder.

In a phone interview Wednesday, Nelson County Sheriff David Hill said in addition to his units, other police and sheriff's departments along the escort's route from Richmond to Stuart's Draft honored Wagner from overpasses along I-64.

"It's heartbreaking of course and it's one of the things we don't want to think about. It could easily be anyone at any point in time," Hill said.

“He took an oath and he responded to those that were in need, so this speaks volumes of his character and integrity.”

Wintergreen Fire and Rescue posted to its public Facebook page Sunday, “The support shown for the public safety team at Wintergreen over the past 24 hours has been overwhelming.”

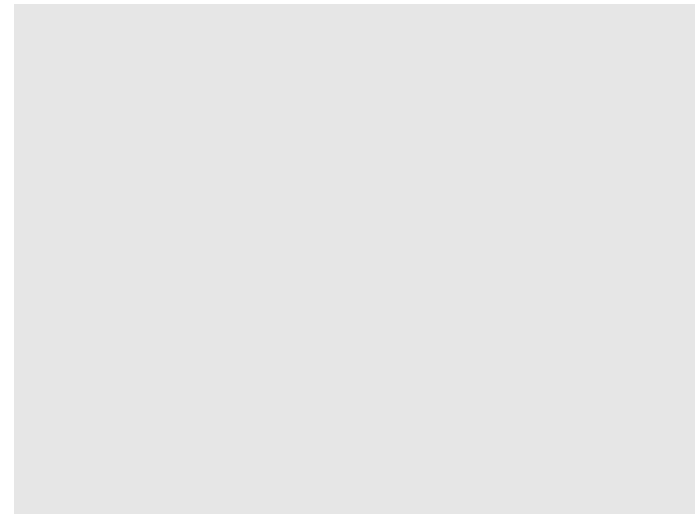
“It is very important that we support Officer Wagner’s family. Sadly, Wintergreen Police Officers don’t have the same benefits as public police officers. They’re required to complete the same academy, have the same authority, and do the same jobs, however, due to antiquated laws, they don’t have the same benefits.”

According to Virginia Code, a private officer is not entitled to benefits under the Line of Duty Act or under the Virginia Retirement System and is not a “qualified law enforcement officer” within the meaning of the federal Law Enforcement Safety Act. According to the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice, there are 42 private law enforcement agencies in the state.

The Virginia Association of Chiefs of Police and Wintergreen Police Chief Dennis Russell organized a public fundraiser for Wagner’s family that as of Wednesday afternoon had raised \$92,000. Local representatives intend to go further, though.

Chair of the Nelson County Board of Supervisors Jesse Rutherford said in a phone interview Wednesday he and West District Supervisor David Parr met with the Wintergreen Police Department on Sunday, and are working on a resolution to honor Wagner and endorse legislation to extend the line of duty benefits.

“Chris was a breadwinner for his family, is my understanding,” Rutherford said.



Local law enforcement personnel saluted slain Wintergreen Police Officer Chris Wagner as his body was transported along I-64 by state police June 20.
photo courtesy of Nelson County Sheriff’s Office

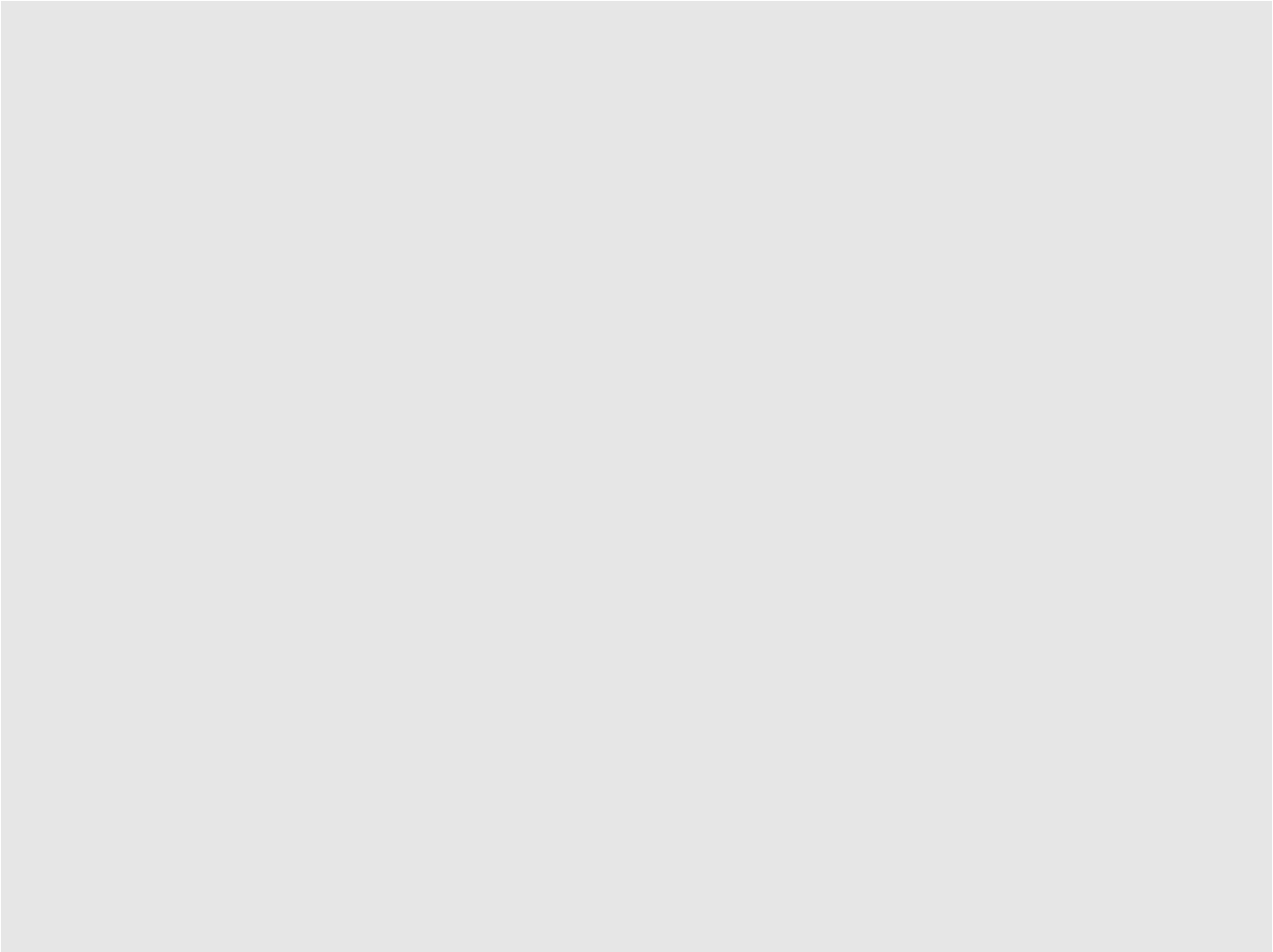
He thinks the families of deceased private officers deserve the same benefits as state officers, and wants the legislation change to also extend to animal control officers.

“Unfortunately, this is how we learned about it,” Rutherford said of the issue, adding as a county, Nelson wants to “support our own.”

Parr explained his stance on expanding the Line of Duty Act benefits in a statement.

“[Private Police Departments and Animal Control Officers] are not only integral parts of our overall public safety program in Nelson; they are essential components of public welfare in localities statewide. They protect and serve our citizens, putting their lives on the line every day, just as other covered positions do; and they should be afforded the same benefits.”

Rutherford reached out to and found support in the Virginia Senate and House of Delegates with Sen. Mark Peake, R-Lynchburg, and Del. Ellen Campbell, R-Rockbridge.



Wintergreen Fire and Rescue took to Facebook June 18 thanking the community for its support in light of Officer Chris Wagner's death.

Photo courtesy of Wintergreen Fire and Rescue

Interviewed by phone Tuesday, Sen. Peake said he intends to sponsor a bill to change the code concerning private police officer's line of duty benefits and plans on being the chief patron in the state Senate.

Peake said localities may protest about the cost, but that private police officers "put their lives on the line just like any other officer," and if an officer is killed in the line of duty "their families shouldn't suffer."

According to the Virginia Line of Duty Act, the one-time payment for the surviving spouse and dependents of an officer killed in the line of duty is \$100,000.

In an emailed statement, Del. Campbell said “... I believe we have an obligation to take care of a fallen officer’s family. Public or private, officers like Chris Wagner are out in the community every single day putting their lives on the line to keep us safe.”

“The least we can do to thank them for their ultimate sacrifice is to make sure their families are eligible for line of duty benefits. I hope another family never has to experience what Officer Wagner’s family is experiencing right now, but if they do, I hope we will be able to take away one source of stress.”



An Amherst County official also expressed support for Nelson supervisors’ planned resolution. Amherst Board of Supervisors member Claudia Tucker asked the board during a meeting Tuesday to formally take up a stance on the matter in July.

“It would equal the playing field between those private officers and officers who serve our localities,” Tucker said. “Amherst County would have a dog in that fight because we have Sweet Briar [College] here. And so we would be in the same situation.”

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