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Falmouth Democrats Hold Caucus, Elect Record Number Of Young Adults

By CALLI REMILLARD

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Scott Simenas, chairman of the Falmouth Democratic Town Committee, speaks during a 2020 forum for presidential candidates.

STEVEN WITHROW/ENTERPRISE

In what was perhaps the most striking turnout of young adults that the Falmouth Democratic Town Committee has ever seen, half of its 21 delegates elected at last week's caucus are college-age students between the ages of 19 and 23.

"We had an especially robust group of young people attending for the first time and college students who live in Massachusetts but are at school now," said Rosemary Dreger Carey, vice-chairwoman of the committee. "That was really encouraging to us."

The caucus, held via Zoom on Sunday, February 27, was well attended by about 40 party members and 15 Democratic Party candidates and their staff. Every Democratic candidate running in a contested race spoke at the caucus, including district attorney candidate Robert Galibois and gubernatorial candidates Sonia Chang-Diaz and Attorney General Maura Healey.

"There are a lot of open seats this year," said committee chairman Scott Simenas. "That's why there's great interest."

Falmouth was allocated 21 delegates this year, a slight increase from 18 in previous years, which came as a response to the consistently high Democratic voter turnout in town. Usually, Mr. Simenas said, the committee only has a few young people to send as delegates to the Massachusetts Democratic Party State Convention. This year, with half the committee's delegation being recent high school grads and current college students, he largely attributes that increase to the organizing of other young but more experienced committee members, like Jack Richardson.

Mr. Richardson, who is one of the 10 elected young adults, is a Class of 2021 Falmouth High School graduate. This was his second caucus. He is currently a student at American University in Washington, DC, and, like many other caucus attendees who were elected as delegates, had found a way to stay active in local politics despite not being primarily located in Falmouth.

"I think the reason we had more than in past years [is] because [the caucus] was virtual," Mr. Simenas said. "The students from colleges could participate from their campus. In the past, they had to be present, which is difficult. So virtually they were at their campuses: American University in Washington DC, Smith College, UMass Lowell. They were scattered up and down the East Coast but because of Zoom, they were able to participate."

Many of the newly elected delegates, like Mr. Richardson, are 2021 graduates of Falmouth High School: Nora Deyo, currently at Smith College; Trevor Hodgson, currently at Bentley University; Ben Homand, currently at Colby College; Sophie Howard, currently at Salve Regina University; Matthew

Murphy, currently at UMass Lowell; Christian Ryan; and Eamon MacKilligan.

Also elected were James Lea, a second-time delegate and 2020 FHS graduate currently at American University; Daniel Gessen, a member of the Falmouth Democratic Town Committee's executive committee and student at UMass Amherst; and Thomas Moakley, who is currently serving as the assistant district attorney at the Cape and islands Office.

"[Mr. Moakley] is another young person, but he is very experienced," Ms. Carey said of the 2013 FHS graduate. "He's not a newcomer, but he's an important young voice in our caucus."

This year, Massachusetts Democrats have the opportunity to win back the governor's office, something Ms. Carey said has drawn a lot of interest. Other offices up for grabs are the attorney general, Cape and islands district attorney, secretary of the Commonwealth, auditor, and lieutenant governor.

At the start of the caucus, candidates were placed into breakout rooms to chat and get acquainted with party members before being brought to the main room for a welcome from Senator Susan L. Moran and Representative Dylan A. Fernandes.

"They both stressed that the importance of the caucus this year is an open governorship," Mr. Simenas said. "We want to try to get a Democrat in there, so that legislation can pass without having to override a veto from Governor Baker. Even though we have a super majority and we can override them... it's tedious to get it through that way. That's the importance of the gubernatorial race."

Two of the prominent themes from the caucus, Ms. Carey said, were COVID recovery and climate change. Candidates discussed at great lengths the difficulties brought about or exacerbated by the pandemic, including remote learning, lack of accessible child care, economic struggles, and the opioid crisis. Candidates were allotted two and a half minutes to speak, Ms. Carey said, and many were candid about their personal experiences and struggles with such issues as they discussed their policy visions for office.

"It was almost like a horse race," Ms. Carey said. "Really interesting, you got a flavor for every candidate, and my take was that our state has an embarrassment of riches right now—just amazing candidates running for every office. It's going to be so hard to choose, I think."

At the caucus, the delegate election process begins with nominations from the floor, Mr. Simenas said. When the committee ended up with about 24 accepting nominees for the 21 delegate spots, veteran caucus members recognized the opportunity to engage young people in local politics and withdrew, which allowed more younger members to be elected.

“Many of us veterans have been to numerous caucuses over the years, so all of us appreciate it when new folks show up and want to be a delegate or participate in Democratic politics,” Mr. Simenas said. “That’s one of the goals that everybody has, as a veteran like myself: trying to get and recruit new people, young or old, that haven’t participated in the past, to get them involved. Particularly in this case, we had so many young people.”

“This is a real important time right now in our democracy,” Ms. Carey said. “Advancing democratic values is important to everyone and young people are seeing that, too, and getting involved.”

The Massachusetts Democratic Party State Convention will be held on June 4 at the DCU Center in Worcester. This year’s event will be hybrid, allowing people to join both remotely and in person.

“The main part of the convention is to meet the candidates in person,” Mr. Simenas said. “That’s something that’s difficult in the Zoom environment, something Zoom can’t replace. And it can’t replace meeting new people either. When you’re going live, you’ll meet new people and talk to them. On Zoom, that’s impossible because you can’t have side-by-side conversations.”

In the meantime, delegates will spend the next few months getting to know the candidates they will be endorsing and their policies through meet-and-greet events, fundraisers, and general campaigning. The Falmouth Democratic Town Committee also hosts candidates at its monthly meetings, which usually focus on a particular topic or issue for more in-depth discussion. Ms. Carey said their meetings are generally well attended, and the committee is looking forward to generating further interest now that the caucus is complete.

“We were very pleased with it and it was a big team effort,” she said. “We have a strong team and pulled off a nice caucus and we’re really looking forward to campaigning.”

The committee will meet via Zoom on Wednesday, March 16, at 7 PM.