

Largo/Mid-Pinellas Democratic Club  
Candidate Forum  
3/19/2018

Introduction by Mary Lou Ambrose, President - Tonight we are hosting a candidate forum for four of our local candidates: Ryan Torrens candidate for Florida Attorney General, Bernie Fensterwald candidate for Florida Senate D16, Jennifer Webb candidate for Florida House D69 and Carl Zimmerman candidate for Pinellas School Board. To begin, each candidate will be allowed five minutes to introduce themselves.

Following the introductions, Wanda Schwerer and Peggy Tucker will ask each candidate the same pre-prepared questions. Lastly, the candidates will be allotted a one minute statement.

Let's get started.

#### INTRODUCTIONS

**Ryan Torrens** - Ryan introduced himself as a Tampa attorney who fights for consumer protection and takes on big banks to protect against unfair foreclosures. He has been to court against JPMorgan Chase, Bank of America, Wells Fargo and many others. As Attorney General he will take on the legislature to fully fund our public schools, and I will fight against Betsy DeVos' work to privatize America's schools. Ryan said, "I will fight for our seniors, work to protect our families and take on the opioid crisis. I will always respect and enforce the rule of law. I will work to restore honor and integrity to the Florida's Attorney General Office necessary following Pam Bondi's term." His website is [www.ryantorrens.com](http://www.ryantorrens.com).

**Carl Zimmerman** - Carl began with comment on Ryan Torrens last point concerning Pam Bondi. He stated that while in the legislature he had worked to fix Pam Bondi, but she just wouldn't be fixed. It will be good to have her gone.

Carl stated that he has been a teacher for 33 years. He just retired. He went on to say that we are in dire straits - teachers want out - students want out. Carl stated, "As a school board member I bring boots on the ground experience from the classroom to the boardroom." He will work to restore respect to our schools for teachers, administrators and for students. He favors bringing back technical training to Pinellas schools. Carl's Website is [www.carlzimmerman.com](http://www.carlzimmerman.com). He asked for support and volunteers to knock on doors.

**Jennifer Webb** - As the candidate for HD 69, Jennifer first thanked the audience for all the help over the past two years and asked for further support. Jennifer said, "I am committed to fighting to bring local control back to our communities." She will fight to return control of local schools to the local school districts and not to charter schools. Jennifer went on to say that as the representative for HD 69, she will work to fund mental health services for our communities as well as to work to protect our water resources, beaches and all of our wonderful Florida environment. She encouraged all to visit her Website, [www.electjenniferwebb.com](http://www.electjenniferwebb.com).

**Bernie Fensterwald - Bernie explained**, "As a candidate for Florida's SD 16, I am running because of the complete dysfunction of the Florida Senate." Bernie went on to say that he wants comprehensive healthcare for Floridians. He wants to see good paying jobs return to Florida. He believes that there is much too much money in government. He favors moving the capital from Tallahassee to a more central location to make it more accessible for everyone. Bernie asked that we visit his website for more information, to volunteer and to donate, [www.bernie2018.com](http://www.bernie2018.com).

EDUCATION Question 1. Do you favor a pay raise for teachers and do you favor the attempt to kill the teachers' union with the new 50% rule.

**Ryan Torrens:** He favors raising teacher salaries. As AG, he will not defend this law limiting teachers' unions.

**Jennifer Webb:** We need to pay top tier wages to have top tier teachers. In Tallahassee, She will work to overturn this anti-union law.

**Carl Zimmerman:** He stated that of course the money is important and he would definitely support salary increases, however, as important is having funding for those classroom needs no longer support by the legislature. These items help facilitate teaching. These include counselors, mental health, smaller class sizes. The idea of neutralizing the teachers' union will not improve schools in any way.

**Bernie Fensterwald:** He explained that he spent several years as a school counselor. He supports raising teacher salaries and is against the union-killing bill.

EDUCATION Questions 2, 3 & 4 What is your position on 2) arming school employees 3) banning assault weapons? 4) Would you have voted for or against the school safety bill the Legislature just passed? And why?

**Jennifer Webb:** She stated that she is against arming teachers and support banning assault weapons. She would have voted against school safety bill because it does not address enough specific issues or provide sufficient funding.

**Carl Zimmerman:** Carl supports arming police officers but not teachers. He supports banning assault weapons. He would have voted against the school safety bill because arming teachers is not an intelligent response and the other safety measures either didn't address the proper issues or were unfunded or underfunded.

**Bernie Fensterwald:** No to arming teachers. SROs are a good solution. Bernie supports banning assault weapons and opposes the school safety legislation.

**Ryan Torrens:** Ryan stated that he believes arming teachers is wrong. He stated his support for an assault weapons ban and would have voted against the safe schools for all the reasons already stated.

EDUCATION Question 5 Would you have voted for or against the K-12 legislation just passed? Specifically explain your choice.

**Carl Zimmerman:** I would have voted against the K-12 legislation. It was a poor solution for the problem stated. It was an obvious ploy to further move toward privatized schools.

**Bernie Fensterwald:** I would have voted against the K-12 bill. There are much better ways to deal with bullies.

**Ryan Torrens:** Ryan would not have supported the K-12 legislation as it was just a means to move funding to private schools.

**Jennifer Webb:** Jennifer stated that she would not have supported the K-12 legislation designed to further fund charter schools.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND PRISONS Question 1 What steps would you support to reduce opioid abuse?

**Bernie Fensterwald:** Bernie stated that he would support the reduction of the supply and increase availability of medical marijuana to provide alternative pain management.

**Ryan Torrens:** Ryan stated that he would support a serious attempt to hold pharmaceutical companies responsible. Why should the public sector, alone, be saddled with finding solutions? These companies should to pay to help put people in rehab and develop treatment programs.

**Jennifer Webb:** Jennifer that in our schools opioid usage is down and crack usage is up. She believes that we should expand spending on evidence-based programs. Get medical marijuana going in this state.

**Carl Zimmerman:** Usage is way down, but we need to keep these users out of the prison system. Carl explained that once a young person is arrested and becomes a part of the system he or she can be lost forever. We need more trained counselors in our schools.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND PRISONS Question 2 Do you favor weakening mandatory sentencing laws?

**Ryan Torrens:** Ryan indicated that mandatory sentences do not work. He is against the mandatory sentences.

**Jennifer Webb:** Jennifer explained that she does not support mandatory sentencing because it does not allow for extenuating situations.

**Carl Zimmerman:** Carl is against mandatory sentencing.

**Bernie Fensterwald:** Bernie stated that mandatory sentencing ties the judge's hands and requires a certain sentence even when circumstances suggest another sentence would be more appropriate. Bernie opposes mandatory sentencing.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND PRISONS - Question 3 What is your position on private prisons?

**Ryan Torrens:** Ryan indicated that he is against private prisons. Prisons, as with schools, better serve the citizens of Florida if they are run by the state. Privatized prison goals can be in direct conflict with that of the state of Florida.

**Jennifer Webb:** Jennifer does not support private prisons because it can lead to prisoner abuse.

**Carl Zimmerman:** Carl stated that private prisons are not less expensive because they must make a profit.

**Bernie Fensterwald:** Bernie said that private companies should not be contracted to take over the responsibility from the states as their primary goal would be to make a profit.

HOME RULE - Discuss your thoughts about Home Rule vs. Pre-emption. Are there any instances where statewide rules should prevail?

**Jennifer Webb:** Jennifer indicated that in some case, Pre-emption makes sense; in others the communities can best serve the needs of its citizens. Local taxes, for instance, should be decided locally. Jennifer also believes that short-term vacation rental rules should be appealed.

**Carl Zimmerman:** He agrees with Jennifer's position.

**Bernie Fensterwald:** Bernie believes that in some cases, Home Rule is better; however, there are other instances where pre-emption makes more sense.

**Ryan Torrens:** As Attorney General I would not enforce state pre-emption of gun control laws.

REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS - Over the last decade reproductive rights have been decimated by the Legislature. How would you work to restore them?

**Carl Zimmerman:** I would work to have open and honest sex education classes. I support choice.

**Bernie Fensterwald:** In the senate, Bernie said he would not vote for any more bills to limit a woman right to chose and I would work to repeal existing laws limiting reproductive rights.

**Ryan Torrens:** Ryan stated that the AG should support reproductive rights. He also said that the Governor should stay out of the conversation.

**Jennifer Webb:** Jennifer explained that our tax dollars pay for faith-based billboards that preach against reproductive rights. We are also paying for faith-based counseling centers that shame women for wanting reproductive services.

**Mary Lou Ambrose** paused the Candidate Forum for a quick message from Elizabeth Snedeker.

Elizabeth greeted the Club and announced that there will be a Task Force for Responsible Gun Laws table at the Indian Rocks Beach Greenfest. She encouraged everyone to come and have fun at the annual IRB event, visit the booth and support this important cause.

CANDIDATE SUMMARIES

**Bernie Fensterwald:** There is a lot at stake here in Florida, not just with Trump, but with this current legislature. How do we get there from here? Well, Democrats need to be bold about what they stand for. After his election to the Florida Senate, he will work to turn things around in Tallahassee.

**Ryan Torrens:** What we have been doing here in Florida has not been working. We cannot keep doing the same things and expect a different outcome. Isn't that a definition of insanity? Democrats must be proud and be bold

and take back our state. He asked that we join him. He said please donate, volunteer, and vote so we can take the action needed to take our state back.

**Jennifer Webb:** Jennifer asked us to go home and call four friends. Ask them to help us elect new leadership for our communities in Tallahassee. Please vote for Jennifer Webb, the unifying candidate for House District 69.

**Carl Zimmerman:** Carl stated that he is the best candidate for the Pinellas County School Board. He comes straight from the classroom. He understands the problems. While he was in the Florida House of Representatives he served on the Education committee, the K-12 sub-committee and higher education committee. We need to make some important changes. He understands how to make those changes but to do so he needs volunteers and dollars.