

In Their Own Words: Brandon Potter (D), House District 16



Brandon Potter (D)

We talked to many of the local candidates running for public office in the upcoming 2020 election. We asked each of them the same set of questions, with the promise to print their answers only lightly edited for clarity. The following answers are from **Brandon Potter** (D), running against **Maryann Lancia** (R), for RI House District 16.

Motif: What are, in order, your top three priorities or issues if elected?

Brandon Potter: In the immediate, we need to start by properly addressing our health crisis. Our

General Assembly has been out of session and there's important work that needs to get done urgently. We need safe staffing in nursing homes, and we need rules reform that brings a change of culture to our State House.

Secondly, we have to address our state budget and ensure the state aid provided to cities like Cranston remains in place. Cutting funding to Cranston would force the city to raise property taxes, devastate our community and exasperate the financial fallout from COVID. I've met many retirees and seniors who are either planning on leaving the state because of taxes, or worried they'll be forced to leave because they have fixed incomes and can't afford any more. People have to be prioritized in whatever budgetary decisions are made.

Third, we need to invest in the future economy with infrastructure and renewable energy. We can come out of this period stronger than before and lead RI forward with economic development and good paying jobs. We have to rebuild our economy, and with interest rates being near 0, now is the time for government to make investments that stimulate our economy and create jobs.

Motif: After the election, the Supreme Court is scheduled to hear a case with ramifications that could eliminate the Affordable Care Act, potentially reducing the high insured rate in Rhode Island. In a country without ACA protections, what should healthcare for Rhode Islanders look like?

BP: Sick people shouldn't be thought of as a business opportunity. There's no reason anyone here should ever be without access to affordable healthcare. My girlfriend Katie is 31 and has a genetic kidney disease called FSGS. She's been a dialysis patient for three years and has been denied a transplant because of our broken system. People with preexisting conditions must be protected, and the assault on the ACA by the Trump administration is an inexcusable disgrace. RI should codify the ACA into state law with a public option, and we should continue to expand our healthcare as we work toward a single-payer universal system.

Motif: Do you think police departments are overfunded, and if so, how would you reallocate those resources?

BP: I've been critical of the defund the police narrative for a few reasons. One, I think racial justice is one of the most serious issues in our country, and we need to consider it in how decisions are made in all areas. When we can witness Black people murdered and assaulted on video like we have, it should be clear to everyone how serious of a problem there is. We need to acknowledge that with the seriousness it deserves. Systemic racism doesn't just exist in our criminal justice system or police departments. These tragedies are only allowed to happen by failures in our education system, failures in our economy, failures in our healthcare system. We ask police to do too much, and certainly we need to take

a holistic look at how we can better combat and reduce crime long term. But trying to simplify the solution to a bumper sticker sized slogan like “defund the police” does this conversation a big disservice. We need to hold police accountable to the highest of ethical standards, and there has to be absolute zero tolerance for abuse of power. We also need to recognize the difficulty and danger of what it means to be a cop. We have to acknowledge police are people too, they’re affected by what they see and experience in that job. In some cases, it might make sense to invest more money in training, counseling or hiring more officers. In some cases I’m sure we can eliminate needless spending on military equipment. We also should be divesting from prisons and ending privatization, so this isn’t a one-size-fits-all solution. We have a lot of work to do and we need to be able to pull people into the discussion, and not be more divisive and escalate the tensions if we want real progress to happen. I think it’s a lot deeper than that.

Motif: Should school funds be pooled and redistributed on a weighted scale to address statewide equity issues, or should districts continue to fund their own community schools? Are there school districts that should be combined?

BP: The inequities in our education system have to be addressed at the state level. Local property taxes disproportionately fund education, which breeds inequity and strains working families and seniors. I don’t know that combining school districts is the solution, but we certainly need to move more toward a state-based funding formula that isn’t heavily reliant on local home values to determine education quality.

Motif: COVID most harshly impacted a lot of core industries in Rhode Island (eg, hospitality, restaurants, arts/entertainment). What can elected officials do to revitalize these industries and improve the lives of our poorest residents?

BP: Before we can revitalize we have to preserve what we have. Small businesses from restaurants, retail shops, event venues, etc. have been devastated. People have had to close their businesses, many are dangerously close to. We need to release the aid to provide assistance to small businesses. This money shouldn’t be used to plug holes in our existing state budget. From there we can rebuild our economy by investing in infrastructure and renewable energy, and make our state an attractive place to live and work. We need to bring public and private funding together on appropriate development. We need to raise the minimum wage. There’s a lot of work to do in our economy, but with political courage and independent voices that are willing to speak up on behalf of what’s best for regular people, I’m confident we can come out of this stronger than before.

Motif: Climate change is a very real threat in Rhode Island — we are in close proximity to the ocean and broke temperature and drought records this year. If elected, what steps would you take to protect the environment?

BP: I support all efforts to get us to carbon neutrality as soon as possible. I see addressing climate change locally with two critical components. One, we have to acknowledge the severity of climate change, the financial impact it's having on us and will continue to have, and display a sense of leadership in deciding to play our part in addressing it. I believe in leading by example, and I think Rhode Island being the smallest state has a unique opportunity to demonstrate what's actually possible. Secondly, I think we need to recognize working people in how we shift to a new energy system. We have to make sure as we shift to a new energy system we're not leaving working-class families behind.

We can create thousands of good-paying jobs right here in the state by investing in renewable energy and lowering utility costs for families and small businesses, but it will take standing up to the fossil fuel industry, National Grid and powerful special interests. I think we need to use this moment, as we're rebounding from the financial fallout of COVID, to be really bold and kill two birds with one stone. Rebuild our economy, invest in an emerging market and do our part in combating the climate crisis.