

Courtney Pyrke

They/Them • Saint John Harbour • NDP

Candidate #03

1. Why are you running in this election?

Okay, so I'm running in the election because when I worked at the public librarian at the Saint John Free Public Library, I saw a lot of patrons, too. Voices and values weren't being heard or listening to by the current government or the past government. And for me, I want to uplift my community to ensure that all the voices are being heard in my community and that everyone in my community is contributing to shaping our future.

2. Describe how the time living in your riding has informed your qualifications as a candidate.

Yeah, so I do live in my riding and I worked in my riding. I don't work anymore. I'm unemployed, I'm a student now. So because of the school I go to, it's that school outside of my riding. But when I worked in my riding, I saw a lot of injustice and I saw a lot of people who kind of weren't being listened to and were kind of being left behind. A lot of people, like, just through my experience at the library, it seemed like they didn't really care about politics. And I think that really stems down to, like, they were just constantly being let down by the government and having to jump through these hoops to do things like find housing or kind of get their way out of poverty. In my riding, we have the highest child poverty rate. So I think it's just things like this, a large part of the community and my riding is this and is just constantly being let down by the government. So I think in terms of that, they just didn't see the value. They don't see the value in getting involved because they don't trust the system, I guess. And I think for me, that's disappointing to see, because I feel like everyone in my community should feel that they can get involved and should feel that like their voice matters. But I think through my experience, it wasn't like that at all.

3. Describe how your time living in New Brunswick has informed your qualifications as a candidate.

Yeah, so I actually grew up in a different province. I am from Saint John. And so I have a unique experience in that I've seen kind of a different experience in a different province. And for that, I come here and, you know, we pay some of the highest taxes and we're not getting the same quality of life, I guess, that they're getting in other places where they're paying less taxes. And I know there's more people in those places and it's, it's different. But I do feel like here, it just seems like the system is a little bit more corrupt and it seems like it's working more against people rather than for people.

4. How does your experience (ie. education, lived experience, workplace) contribute to your qualifications as a candidate?

Yeah, so I'm a student at the university and I'm studying education. So I'm kind of doing a deep

dive into the curriculum system here to understand kind of like what students are learning in terms of information literacy skills. So that's definitely been eye opening to see that there's kind of a huge gap there, particularly in digital literacy and information literacy as well. My mom was actually a teen parent and she is from Saint John from the old North End. I grew up in poverty. So for me that experience, I guess, I don't want any other child to have to go through what I went through when I, you know, grew up with a single parent living in poverty. So as a librarian and a public librarian, I am even actually working at a university, which has an academic library there. You know, I see a lot of students who are in crippling debt who can't afford to eat who were at the university all day, every day without food. So that in like, you know, they're exhausted, they're tired. They're constantly worrying about how they're going to pay for next semester or how they're going to pay for their rent. Like that has been pretty eye-opening for me. And then as well as the public, the other side of it at the public library where I'm working with more of the general public just seeing how let down people are, people just seem so depressed and there's no hope left. That the system really is kind of beating them down. And oftentimes people will just tell me, "Oh, well, that's just the way it is here". But it doesn't have to be like that.

5. If elected, what will be your top 5 priorities for your riding?

So number one would be tax reform and municipal reform. That's a huge issue in New Brunswick in general. I mean, obviously it's a huge issue in Saint John because the city is broke. But it definitely is. It affects kind of every, every part of New Brunswick. I mean, the rich keep getting richer and the poor keep getting poorer. And it's definitely seen in Saint John Harbor.

My next one would be access to healthcare. I care about Clinic 554. I advocate for Clinic 554. I want to see that service paid for and I want to see that service extended across New Brunswick. As well as other services like primary care, we need to really put money in and focus and energy into primary care to have more family doctors and more nurses available to people here.

The next one would be education. So the Community Hub and Learning Commons that the South End is trying to get, Develop Saint John and Living Saint John are actually trying to get funding for by the provincial government. That's a huge priority for me. We haven't had a new school in 40 years! Four, zero, 40 years. So it's more than just a school, it's wraparound services. And that's definitely something in a place that, where we have the highest child poverty, that's a hundred percent needed to kind of uplift this riding.

I would say the other one is affordable housing. Affordable, mixed income housing is super important. I want to work with people like Dr. Julia Woodhall-Melnick, and Dr. Eric Wiseman, who specialize in this area at the university, and they have a lot of good ideas and good research in terms of changing the policy, like the double taxation and different things around that too, to change the way that the system was working in Saint John Harbor.

And I would say the last thing would be transit. Transit is important for like, for everyone really.

Even if you have a car, I mean, I have two cars and I wish I didn't have any cars. But it's really hard to get around and in New Brunswick and Saint John without one, if you need to be constantly driving outside the city or if you have multiple jobs that you need to get from one job to the next, like the transit system is not good because it's not properly funded here. And I really think that transit, it shouldn't cost anything. It should be free. That should be covered by the provincial government, especially after COVID after so many people kind of got let go and had financial difficulties there. We need to focus on being able to get people back up onto their feet.

6. LGBTQ+ and reproductive healthcare

Blaine Higgs doesn't clearly see the obviousness in it, but repealing 84-20 would be the biggest thing, the main priority that needs to go. And on top of that, I'm working with the New Brunswick Medical Society and the healthcare workers in the city. So I know that even if 84-20 gets axed, there are still a lot of barriers that need to be addressed. So for example, the way that the billing system works in New Brunswick with the medical billing system, I don't know, like a lot about that, cause I'm not a healthcare professional, but I know that it's an issue and it needs to be addressed just based on my conversations with the New Brunswick Medical Society.

Regulation 84-20 affects the payment for the required equipment in the family practice offices, because the equipment in the hospitals is currently being paid for mostly by the government. But in a family practice office there's currently no policy or anything that holds the government to having to pay for those, for that equipment. So when you provide an abortion, you need to have ultrasound equipment and if the government is not going to pay for that, then that holds onto the family practitioners to pay for that. So I think it's definitely a complicated issue in terms of reproductive health. We need to be working with the medical society. I know that they recently released an ask of their demands for the incoming government.

So I think it's important to work alongside them in terms of these issues, rather than kind of pretending that, you know, how this is gonna work. Because like I said, I'm not a healthcare person, so I don't have all the answers and I don't work in that field, but you know, they do. So for me, it'd be really important to work alongside them. And also on that note is in terms of educating doctors on LGBTQ+ health, that's a huge issue. So the system is kind of flawed in that a doctor technically never has to learn anything about LGBTQ+ health. So they do have to take continuing education credits every year to a certain number. But they get to choose what they want to take. There's no mandatory course or subject that they have to take or learn about.

So technically a doctor could go, like I said, 50 years and never have to learn about LGBTQ+ health. So I think that in itself needs to be addressed. That's an issue that needs to be addressed with the College of Physicians and Doctors because they kind of control/mandate that, so kind of making sure we're holding those doctors accountable. Like I asked my family doctor, what are you doing to learn about LGBTQ+ health? What are you doing to learn about black people? Because you know, those symptoms are different on that skin tone than white skin tone. So yeah, it's a complicated issue that we would have to work alongside the medical societies and the College of Physician and Doctors with.

7. Access to mental health and/or addictions services

So I think that those and I believe this is in the [party name hidden] platform as well. That service needs to be covered by Medicare. That's the first barrier, is that it's not covered by Medicare. So you know, for both myself and my spouse, we pay, I think each, we pay \$200 a month, so \$400 a month for therapy and counseling. And that needs to be covered by Medicare. It's ridiculous that anyone has to pay that much to take care of their mental health. I mean, mental health is just as important as physical health. So definitely that, and I think making sure we're doing a better job at recruiting these people, these professionals into the province. So for example, my therapist needs to take more people in, like she's told me if you know anyone who needs counseling, let me know. But the problem is that people can't afford it.

So I think we need to kind of figure that out and pay for that service for people. I know that Family Plus offers a sliding scale model where they charge based on what you can afford. But you know, a lot of people don't know about that. And also I don't know, I feel like some people feel like, "Oh, well, you know, I should be able to pay the full price like everybody else". So they either don't go and see it or, or they don't take advantage of that service. But yeah, it definitely needs to be covered by the government fully. And I think that would help people going to see counselors because you don't need to go to the Mercantile Center. You can just go to a counselor or therapist in the city instead.

8. Glyphosate use in New Brunswick

So for that we just need to stop using it. We need to stop spraying. We need to, you know, stop hurting our environment the way that we are, we only have one earth. And we need to take care of it the best we can. So I mean, this is a subject that I don't know a lot about because it's not something I study every day. I work in education, I don't work in environment. So for [party name hidden] again, we are working with the professionals on this topic. We're lucky in that, you know, in New Brunswick we have academics and we have a few universities and environmental specialists that we can lean on to to help us with these issues. I think for me, that's definitely what I would be doing is educating myself through consulting the professionals and what we can do to get away from the spraying on the province

9. Access to affordable housing in Saint John

It's about mixed income. Housing is really important and it's a model that they use in a lot of other places in Ontario. So for something like this, we do have specialists that are literally in Saint John working on this issue. So Dr. Julia Woodhall-Melnick and Dr. Eric Wiseman specialize in homelessness and housing. Julia Woodhall-Melnick worked with Dr. Jim Dunn who is the Canadian Institute of Health Research Chair in Ontario. Him and his team in Hamilton had been doing a lot of work around affordable mixed income housing. So we should be kind of looking at those models and the work that they've done to implement that here in Saint John. The double taxation needs to go. That's a huge barrier as well for the province. I know that Dr. Eric Wiseman has been working on tiny homes, which is a really interesting concept that we could introduce in Saint John and in New Brunswick in general, to help get people off the streets

and to help provide people with homes. But I really do think that the answer would be the mixed income housing. People like landlords are so skeptical about it because they think that, Oh, when they take someone in who was homeless, they're not going to pay their rent, or they're gonna cause problems, or kinda like mess up the apartment or whatever. But we know from research that it's actually better to have somebody in your apartment building that experienced homelessness, because when they receive their government funding for their housing, that money automatically goes to the landlord. So you're guaranteed the rent from that person rather than, you know, a working individual who might leave their job or something might come up. So yeah, I think definitely mixed income housing is really important and something that we need to look into and implement here in the Harbour and then New Brunswick.

10. Police funding in Saint John

So I am definitely pro Defund the Police, but I think it's more than that. And so obviously the police need more training for sure. Like they need more mental health training and more training in those areas that they're not getting from their courses at Holland college or wherever else they might take that if they go to Ontario or something. So they definitely need more training there and more support there. But I think it's also about taking money from the police budget and spending it on more social services. I was talking to Donna Reardon about this who told me that, you know, they need police officers in her area because there's drug issues and kind of vandalism issues. But if these people had better support in social services, we know from research that the vandalism and the drug use and that would be lower. So we definitely need to give the police more training and support in that way, but also we need to take money from that and put it into other social services.

11. Reporting and investigations of sexual assaults

So I think that kind of falls in line with the more training for police officers. It's tricky because, I mean, personally, I think that when you report something like this, it should be reported to the police, but also the Sexual Health Center or something like that. Somewhere there is a specialist that knows more about these issues than the police would. So kind of including this organization in those reports, I think would help with that issue. I don't know a lot about the back-end about how that would work, but I would like to see kind of the Sexual Health Center or, you know, some sort of other body similar to that work with these individuals who are reporting as well as the police, so that we can guarantee that these reports are being dealt with in an appropriate way. I think it's kind of foolish that we're only relying on the police to deal with this where, you know, they don't really have that in-depth experience working with sexual assault survivors or sexual assault victims.

12. Municipal and Industrial Tax reform

So I think it needs to be done. It needs to, we need to tax the rich or, you know, the Irving's or the McCain's or whoever you want to, whatever you want to label as the rich and give that money back into social services, back into the nonprofits, back into the community partners, and back into transit. The rich in the city keep getting richer and the poor keep getting poorer and, you know, it doesn't need to be like that. We need to kind of comprehensively reevaluate how

taxes and how this poor reform is looked at in our city. I met with Don Darling and talked to him about his document that he had released to the candidates that are running and I think it's important to work alongside the city and make sure that taxes are staying in Saint John. Not only staying in Saint John, but being used in a way that benefits, you know, the people at the bottom. So we should be taking care of the people at the bottom rather than kind of giving these organizations tax breaks. The tax breaks that the Irving building got uptown, like stuff like that needs to, needs to stop.

13. Access to public transit in Saint John

So I actually went to the rally, the Saint John Transit rally recently, and I was talking to the union rep there. And he had informed me that the commission that the city has for transit is actually ending and that the city is taking over transit completely now. And that just puts that more of a burden on the city. So I do think that transit needs to be funded by the provincial government. I'm really disappointed that Blaine Higgs didn't take the money from the federal government to help support transit after COVID. I think that transit should be free. I think that it should be better than what it is now. We need more routes, more buses, and also more inter-city buses as well. So like the COMEX, for example, and you have to run more often and needs to run later. I don't want to take that service completely away from the city. Like, I obviously want them to have a voice in that service, but I think that the government needs to play a bigger role, particularly in funding it and in supporting transit in not just Saint John, but in every city in New Brunswick.

14. Access to affordable childcare in Saint John

Yeah, so that's actually in the [party name hidden] platform. We support universally funded childcare. It's really important. We know from research and from past experiences that oftentimes when a parent has to stay home because of COVID or for whatever other reason, it is oftentimes the mother. So, you know, women are having to stay home with kids and not able to go back to work. So we need to ensure that when both parents, or both caregivers, or one caregiver, depending on the situation, decides to go back to work, that they can go back to work worry-free without having to stress about how they're going to pay for childcare throughout the day. And then on top of that, how they're going to buy food and how they're going to buy clothes and all that kind of stuff. We need to make sure that parents and caregivers can go back to work, worry free, and that their kids are being taken care of and that the government's doing their part in funding childcare. It's so expensive in New Brunswick.

15. Media Ownership in New Brunswick

Yeah, so this is something as a librarian that I really care about because I think that all information should be open and free to all people. I think for media ownership, it's just a way to kind of keep information from people or kind of, I don't want to use this word, but it's basically a way to dumb down the system. So when media is owned by one particular organization, such as Irving, it's a way to control the narrative and in an entire province, which is our situation right now. So the news that like our grandparents get and our parents and even maybe friends are getting is right from Irving. It's obviously biased. We need to do a better job at teaching people the information literacy, which is something that I care about so that when people are reading

the newspaper, they know that it's being funded by Irving.

It's being written by X person and X person has, you know, published this or published that, I don't want to get into specifics, but it's the same in research when an article or a research project is funded by big pharma. You know that the research might be biased because of who funded the project. So it's the same for immediate ownership and for news as well. You need to know more about who's writing the article and where it's coming from, where it's being published, or like, what paper is being published to understand how this information might be biased for media ownership.

I don't know what the answer would be to end that. I know that BNI has been taken to court a few times now to end this media ownership. So like, I don't know what the answer is to ending that, but it definitely needs to be, it needs to stop. I don't support the media ownership here and I think it's hurting our province more than helping.