Trans man seeks to unseat two decade incumbent for Portage County auditor

Lis Regula is looking to be the first openly-trans man elected to public office in Ohio, but it’s his experience and understanding of current budget problems that make his candidacy stand out.

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Photos by Jake Ball

By the year 2022, Portage County is expected to accumulate a $3.5 million budget deficit, according to an April Record-Courier report.

Lis Kenneth Regula wants to change that.

Regula is the Democratic nominee for Portage County auditor, who serves as the chief fiscal officer, in charge of accounting and tax assessment. If he wins, he’d be the first openly trans man elected to a public office in the state of Ohio.

Regula teaches biology at the University of Akron, but his background lies in ecology and statistics. In 2014, he founded Edible Kent, a nonprofit dedicated to planting community gardens around downtown Kent to help the poorest residents access fresh produce.

Now Regula’s got his eyes set on a bigger goal — fixing a looming crisis in the county as a member of the budget committee. But first, he needs to unseat 24-year incumbent Janet Esposito.

“That’s longer than a lot of Portage County residents have been alive,” Regula said.

He’s got nothing against experience. But right now, he said, this job needs a new set of eyes.

“We need somebody that can really take precise, critical analysis to these budgets and figure out what’s going on,” Regula said.
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-Lis Regula
So what is going on, exactly?

As in most municipalities, the sheriff’s department is the largest expenditure in Portage County. And that’s not to mention the planned $21 million extension of the county jail, which the department said it needs to house excess prisoners in the wake of the opioid epidemic.

Sheriff David Doak told News5 in July that the department was already $200,000 over budget for the year. But according to Regula, the current county strategy for overspending is to simply throw more money at the problem.

“It’s been fairly common practice for departments to just come and say, ‘Well, we are past our budget, we need more money,’” Regula said. “That’s not what I did when I owned a business.”

Regula’s plan focuses on solving the overspending problem and uncovering the leaks in the current strategies employed by the county. He also wants to streamline the county’s website, which the auditor also oversees.

Regula points to the lack of Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request forms as an example of inefficiency. In theory, all records of county dealings should be requestable through these forms.

Searching through every department’s page on the county website did not return a single page with a clearly labeled FOIA link, and a search of the site revealed only two pages that mentioned the term “FOIA.” There was not a downloadable form anywhere on the site.

This lack of web access to information means employees of the county spend time entering data alongside their actual jobs, Regula said, leading to wasted money and time. These oversights and inefficiencies seem obvious to Regula, but the average voter often has no idea how local government works, or even what an auditor does.

Such was the case when Ben Secaur first met Regula several years ago, when their kids attended the same elementary school.

Back then, Secaur, a bus driver for Kent City Schools and a part-time pastor in Canfield, had little knowledge of the issues facing Portage County. He said Regula opened his eyes to the ineffective taxation, wasted money and communities overlooked by county spending.

“I see kids every day who would benefit from better budgeting,” Secaur said, referring to the children on his bus route.

Now, he’s helping the campaign by spreading the word and distributing information about Regula’s plans for the county. Secaur said he thinks Regula has a good shot at unseating Exposito, but that doesn’t mean the campaign is slowing down.

In fact, Secaur said the campaign just ordered hundreds of yard signs to hand out in the coming weeks.

The Regula campaign also received a crucial endorsement from the Cleveland Stonewall Democrats (CSD) in the past weeks. CSD is a volunteer-based Democratic club that works to endorse and elect pro-LGBTQ candidates to public office.

Rob Rivera, president of the group, said members voted unanimously in Regula’s favor. The decision came after Regula filled out a questionnaire about his positions on various issues and was interviewed by the membership.

“He’s a highly qualified candidate,” Rivera said. “He completely understood what it takes to win.”

But Regula’s philosophy on these things is simple. “Just correct them and go … It makes her look sillier than anyone else. It reflects more on them,” he said, laughing.

So far, Regula said there haven’t been any malicious attacks on his gender, just misgendering and incorrect pronouns. But, he conceded, the real “push” toward Election Day hasn’t hit yet. Right now, it’s all about being proactive, getting his name out and preparing for whatever comes next.

And what about the so-called “Blue Wave,” the prodigal surge of Democrats elected to office in hopes of opposing the far-right?

Regula is hopeful, but realistic.

“I think that optimistic approach is something that you have to keep in mind,” he said.

“Otherwise, if you think you have no chance of winning, why bother? But at the same time, we’re not going to get this blue wave just out of the air. It takes work. It takes lots of work, lots of people, or at least a little bit of work from lots of people to push that, keep things moving forward, and really make the change that we want.”