

**League of Women Voters of Elmhurst
Candidate Forum Questions – County Board District 1**

Zahra Suratwala (D)

1. The following resolution will be included on the November 6th York Township ballot: "Shall our Representatives and Senators in the U.S. Congress sponsor and/or support measures that will address the serious threat posed by climate change?" Do you support or oppose the resolution, and why?

I strongly support this resolution. Climate change is real, it is serious, and if we don't address it, then all the hard work we do trying to make our communities better for our residents will be in vain. Without a healthy planet on which to live, all other issues become moot. Climate change needs to be a priority. Deprioritizing it or looking the other way or minimizing the threat will only harm us, and the effects of climate change are already seriously impacting people around the globe. It is only a matter of time before each and every one of us is personally affected by climate change.

2. League of Women Voters has taken a stand to eliminate township government. Do you have a plan to increase county government efficiency while maintaining quality services and infrastructure through consolidation and shared services? Please explain your plan.

I support consolidation as long as it doesn't interfere with providing essential services to residents. Consolidation can increase efficiency and with salaries being paid, this can be an effective way to save taxpayer money.

If any consolidation efforts commence, residents should be given a chance to provide input, and the process should be transparent to residents.

The County Board's ACT initiative is reported to be saving the county over \$100 million, but it is not actually saving money. It is more about public relations than it is about actual consolidation and savings.

The merging of the election commission into the county clerk's office, however, is actually very beneficial and I strongly support this. It will bring a savings of about \$300,000 a year.

There has also been some mention of merging dispatch services across townships for potential savings.

Consolidation can lead to improved fiscal oversight, which means we can better fund necessary services such as flood alleviation, the opioid epidemic, and the mental health crisis, and we can spend money on fixing issues that are important to residents, such as

airport noise. These things can only happen if we improve the budget, and I intend to help make that happen.

The budget has not been handled correctly and the County will soon face a deficit if this is not rectified. If the budget issue is resolved, we will then have the funds to bring back Meals on Wheels, address the opioid epidemic, and give much needed attention to mental health care and mental health education/destigmatization.

3. According to Forbes Magazine (7/25/17 issue) DuPage County had over 200 employees earning over \$100,000. Annually. The report states a top staffer with an annual salary of \$201,750. Do you have a plan to reduce personnel costs?

Reducing costs must start with the salaries and benefits paid to elected officials. DuPage County Board members are paid almost twice the salary of other County Board members, and they just voted to give themselves a raise- we need to institute a 10-year salary freeze.

We need to stop providing benefits to DuPage County Board members unless there is a demonstrated need. Many County Board members have full time careers or are business owners from which they already derive benefits, and so without a demonstrated need, this is a waste of taxpayer money.

DuPage County Board members outsource their lobbying to various firms at a cost of \$282,000 in 2018 alone. This outsourcing needs to be either reduced or stopped completely. Kane County Board Members, for example, spend zero on lobbying because they do it themselves.

Several DuPage elected officials receive a car allowance of \$450 per month. This needs to stop immediately.

These actions alone would bring immense savings to the County and the money that is saved can be applied towards important services that improve quality of life for residents, such as those I mention above.

4. County activities are often opaque to the average citizen and most do not even know what district they are in. What is your vision for better communication to show more accountability and transparency to your constituents?

DuPage residents need a direct line of access to their elected officials. This is essential for their leadership to actually work for them. From the middle-of-the-workday timing of the meetings (10am on Tuesdays) to the way decisions are made with little input from residents, the system is currently exclusive, and it needs to be inclusive.

Changes need to be made to the time of the meetings, the way information is disseminated before meetings, and the ability of residents to bring their issues forward.

As a writer, I look forward to following Liz Chaplin's excellent example by posting a detailed account of every County Board meeting on my website, so that each and every DuPage County resident can easily learn what actually goes on in both committee meetings and general meetings, and what decisions are being made. Not only that, but

each and every one of my constituents will know how to reach me and will be confident of receiving an answer from me. I will be available at events year round, not only during an election cycle. And between events, I am always easily reached online and I reply back in a timely fashion. With knowledge comes engagement and better representation.

5. As part of the strategic plan the county must foster the continued growth of its economy. Ensure DuPage County residents have competitive job skills. Foster economic growth and development. Champion DuPage County as a desirable place in which to live and work. What are your suggestions for fulfilling this plan?

One important way to bring in economic growth is through green jobs, especially in the field of solar energy. I believe many consumers are interested in reducing their carbon footprint, and the County is in a great position to educate consumers about their options, encourage businesses to bring their green solutions to the consumer, and generate jobs in the process.

Also, we need to end no-bid contracts for County projects, thus stimulating and encouraging businesses that might otherwise not have access to certain projects. By giving projects only to certain business owners, instead of opening up the playing field to those who do not have a relationship with County officials, we give more businesses the chance to thrive. Ending no-bid contracts is mutually beneficial to both the County and to more businesses across the County.

Infrastructure projects are also important – these provide jobs as well as promote safety, convenience, and interconnectedness.

DuPage County is already a desirable place to live and to work, but we have unmet potential that, with some new leadership and fresh perspective, can be reached.