

Maplewood Democratic Committee - Candidate Questionnaire

FINAL 2022

Name: Deborah Engel

Address: 62 Bowdoin Street, Maplewood, NJ

Section A - Meet the Candidate:

Question 1: Please tell voters In Maplewood a little bit about you.

Hi, I'm Deb! I've opened two local businesses here in SOMa/Mapso - General Store Cooperative on Springfield Avenue in Maplewood and the now-closed co-working & childcare space, Work and Play, in South Orange. I am also a communications specialist, marketer, writer, and small business advocate. I am a mom to three young girls - two at Tuscan Elementary and one at Maplewood Middle School. I am exceptional at relationship and community building, crisis management, and strategic communications with more than 15 years of experience in the kids & family space. I am naturally curious, am happiest when connecting people together, and I love serving our local community.

Question 2: How long have you lived in Maplewood/ Essex County?

This summer will mark 13 years since my husband Matt and I moved to Maplewood in 2009, a year before our oldest daughter was born. We had cousins in town at the time, and had fallen in love with the village when taking the train in for local family events. We chose Maplewood because both my parents and sister lived off I-78 and we were excited to be closer to family. We had also looked in Long Island City, where we were renting, but I dreamed of having a backyard. Being near the train line was of utmost importance to us, as we were both working in Manhattan. I grew up in a suburban town without a train line (New City, NY in Rockland County) and knew first hand about the advantages of the train vs the hours-long commute by car.

Question 3: What does a weekend of fun look like for you in Maplewood?

As we have three school-aged children, we are often running around Maplewood and the surrounding areas, shopping, eating, and attending all of the wonderful family events! I'm also a runner, so sometimes I'm literally running allll around Maplewood while training for a race. There's just something about exploring a town on your feet - there is so much beauty in Maplewood!

We decided to bid on our house because it was walking distance to the Parkwood Diner, and Pete and his staff have kept us well fed for almost 13 years! (I try to ignore him when he asks us when

we're going to have a fourth child, which he predicts will be our first son!) I've always loved Springfield Avenue and was excited when I convinced my business partner to host a pop-up shop there, which evolved into the General Store Cooperative. I've been eating Three Daughter Baking Company's cakes since my now 11-year-old's 2nd birthday, and was excited to help Erica open her first bakery. I often help out with the retail markets hosted on Yale Corner (you may have seen me as Mrs. Claus this year), and my kids enjoy checking out the local makers and listening to the live music. Blue Life Karate was a saving grace for my children from 2020-2021, the stylists at Fringe became my friends, and CKO helped me keep sane after the birth of my children. And I'll always hold a special place in my heart for Maplecrest Park and the Hilton Library as I spent so much time there when my kids were babies.

We spend lots of time in Maplewood Village, too. My MMS daughter and her friends are obsessed with Starbucks and No. 165 – especially the candy bar! I'm an equal opportunity shopper in town, and try to buy local as much as we can. You'll see me pop into A Paper Hat every few months for a new journal, and my kids' favorite place to spend their money is Words. We love Coda and the Pub and Chutzpah Kitchen and Bagel Chateau, and I had delicious scallops at Luna Stella the other night (fun fact, my 8 year old's baby naming was there when it was Highland Place).

I've conducted tons of meetings at Village Coffee, love Palmer's quiche, and can't say enough good things about the generosity of Julie Pauly of The Able Baker. Sometimes we take out pizza from both Village Tratt and Roman Gourmet on the SAME NIGHT because we can't decide which pizza or meatball sub is better. Perch is magical and I love Kamaya and Meus and Toy Division and Maker & Muse and ALL the lovely shops and store owners along Maplewood Avenue and surrounding streets.

I applaud the Township Committee for bringing a grocery store back to Maplewood so quickly, and look forward to the CinemaLab team - who I have worked with in South Orange - bringing movies back to Maplewood Village as well.

And let's not forget Ridgewood Row! Milk Money is a staple for our eco-friendly shopping and I love the community Sarah from West Clothing Co. has been building. I miss Paul and Cedar Ridge but can't get enough of the blueberry lemon scone from Yellow Rose, and my sister's friend from HS opened up Ivy Lane across the street! When my kids were really little, we took a walking tour of Ridgewood and saw a house George Washington stayed at before playing in Orchard Park – a forever favorite of ours. This past weekend, we completed a scavenger hunt in Memorial Park and learned so much about the history of Maplewood!

Question 4: Please express in no more than 100 words why you are the best person to serve on the Township Committee?

I am running for Township Committee as I believe the young families of Maplewood deserve representation. I believe that my background in economic development and communications will add value as the township embarks on a new Master Plan and streamlines its communications and community outreach. I am someone who works well with others and believes in listening,

learning, and finding ways to collaborate and compromise so that all parties feel seen and heard. I have the passion, energy, experience, and drive to lead and serve the residents of Maplewood.

Question 5: What motivates you from your life experience to run for Township Committee?

I love Maplewood and have been serving this community since first opening a brick and mortar business in 2015. Back then, I saw a need for parent support and flexible childcare, and these issues continue to be a problem for parents in our community, as seen by the aftercare waitlists in our school district. I see the demographics changing here and becoming more like the same wealthy white bubble that I grew up in, and that is deeply concerning. The Master Plan process gives us a chance to find ways to keep our seniors in town and provide affordable options for lower income families who already live here or may want to move here. We need to continue to support our small businesses, who felt the love of this community while everyone was in lockdown but fear the downturn in sales as residents go back to commuting and their big box shopping of pre-Covid times. I love our current commercial districts and see great potential on Irvington Avenue and near Boyden Avenue (pre-pandemic you may have seen me checking out properties near there for a now-defunct Work and Play expansion!) although I fully believe we should consult with the neighborhood to hear their thoughts and viewpoints related to further developing the areas.

Question 6: What 3 skills from your lived, professional and/or educational experiences do you bring to the table that will be most beneficial to the township committee? Please elaborate.

1 - Economic Development - My three-and-a-half years on the leadership team of South Orange Downtown (formerly SOVCA), which manages the special improvement district in South Orange like the Maplewood Village Alliance and Springfield Avenue Partnership manage Maplewood's SIDs, gave me a front row seat to the Master Plan process in our sister town. I have been active in the business community in both Maplewood and South Orange and advocated for and connected all of us at the start of the pandemic when I formed a Facebook group to share resources, information and talking points while relief packages were being discussed and passed in Congress and on the state level. I also helped our business owners navigate the paperwork and understand the government-speak of federal and state funded programs. I am a huge supporter of entrepreneurs and small businesses and believe our commercial districts and storefronts are the heart of our towns.

2 - Communication - I have more than 15 years of experience marketing to parents, from being a PR specialist in the kids & family space to creating and running an innovative new business model to support working parents (Work and Play). I understand the needs of working parents with young children as I am a working mom of young children and have created programming and services to support this demographic. I have experience creating websites and content, graphics and social media strategy, and building relationships with media and influencers. I thrive in emergency situations, think fast on my feet and understand the importance of

communicating quickly to your constituents, even if it's just to say "we don't have the answers yet, but we're working on it."

Part of being a successful communicator is listening and that is something I pledge to do, if elected. It's important, especially as our town re-emerges into a post-pandemic world, for our residents to feel heard and know that someone is listening to them.

3 - Collaboration - I am a firm believer that the best ideas, programs, and results come from discussion and debate. I try to understand all sides of an issue and find common footing to reach consensus that most parties are happy with ("most" because I do understand you can't please everyone, even though I really try as I am a people-pleaser at heart!) I think the best example of my experience in this area is the work I did in South Orange around the reusable bag ordinance. At the time, business owners were very upset and confused by this new law that the town surprised them with, and were discouraged that no one asked them - the people it would affect - their thoughts and opinions. Through my advocacy work on behalf of the downtown businesses, a new task force was created that was comprised of business owners, township officials, and members of the environmental commission. The result was a redrafting of the legislation, including an amended timeline, a reduced fee (to match Maplewood's law that passed first), and other edits that led to strong stakeholder support all around.

Question 7: Please briefly summarize your volunteer/civic experience from the last 10 years.

I first jumped into local politics in 2015 with Greg Lembrich's primary campaign as I was excited to see someone with young children represent me in our local government. At the time, I had just opened up the doors to Work and Play, one of the first coworking spaces in the world to also offer childcare. In 2017, after the South Orange Village Center Alliance (now called South Orange Downton) expanded their borders to include my business, I jumped at the chance to join the board, comprised of business owners, property owners and residents. In 2018, I joined the executive committee and held a leadership role in the organization for 3.5 years, including during an extended period of time where the organization had no executive director. I held the position of Chair for the 2021 year, and am proud of leading the organization through a rebranding from "village" to "downtown" and to have refocused our efforts and activities from tentpole events to programs that better support the needs of small businesses, including the creation of two grant programs.

In 2018, I helped Maplewood create a strategic marketing plan around parking in the Village and I served on the board of Temple Sharey Tefilo-Israel's preschool for nearly five years, helping to create more programming and community for young families.

I currently serve on the Neighborhood Preservation Program Grant Steering Committee, overseeing a five-year grant from the state that includes parts of Springfield Avenue and the Hilton Neighborhood. I am project lead for efforts around Yale Corner's beautification and activation. I have also helped facilitate the open-air retail markets held at Yale Corner for the past two years.

Question 8: The Township Committee meetings and Board/Committee meetings take place during the evenings. As the pandemic ends, these meetings are likely to return to in-person meetings. Are there any on-going evening commitments in your life that would make it challenging to serve?

I do not have any commitments in my life that will make it challenging to serve and attend meetings. My family is supportive and has grown accustomed to me attending evening or early morning meetings from all my previous volunteer commitments.

Section B - Vision/Goals

Question 9: Why are you running for Maplewood Township Committee?

I am running for Maplewood Township Committee to provide a voice for families with young children, which is a rapidly growing part of our town's demographic. I represent two segments of the Maplewood population that need a voice in local government - business owners and families with young children. I will provide balance to the Township Committee as I innately understand the issues and concerns of these constituencies and how policies and legislation will affect them. I am running because I believe in the change we on the MDC have talked about, and I believe our community should have options - options make us stronger. I love our community, I believe in our community, and I want all people to feel included in our community.

Question 10: What do you see as the most important priorities/ challenges for the township right now?

Updating the Master Plan is one of the most important priorities for the Township right now, and as I mentioned earlier, I was involved in this process in South Orange. The Master Plan process gives us a chance to examine our zoning and assess how to provide and plan for more affordable housing, smart economic development and environmental concerns.

Public safety and public health should always be a priority for local governments, and these days we have a lot to think about! We have environmental concerns, including increased flooding. We have mental health challenges as the pandemic has touched and changed all our lives, from seniors to toddlers and everyone in between. And we all want Maplewood to be a safe, walkable community for all.

Maplewood also needs better communication from our government to our residents. The Township Committee currently is working on creating streamlined communications from the township that would take the place of social media posts from elected officials, which is a good

start. I believe the Township should also consider having a presence on all the platforms our residents are on, including Instagram and Twitter, to better distribute information. I would also like to see improvements in the township's crisis communications, as seen by the response to the pool/gas leak last summer and the Dehart Park turf conversation. As well, I would like to enhance and improve the working relationship between the school district and the municipalities.

Question 11: If elected, at the end of your 3 years, what is the top priority you want to say you have accomplished?

At the end of my term, if elected, I would like to be able to list the tangible things that I did to make my community better, and more inclusive, by listening to what my constituents want, collaborating with stakeholders and working tirelessly on implementation. At the forefront would be a new master plan for Maplewood. But I would also like to tackle mental health needs. Now that Maplewood has launched a crisis intervention social work program, I would like to explore building a behavioral health first aid program so that all in Maplewood are able to support family, friends, and neighbors. With recreational marijuana dispensaries opening, I would also like to implement community education on prevention and treatment resources for substance use disorders. I also hear my community, especially families with young children, talking about the need for improved and additional athletic fields, universal swim lessons, and affordable childcare. These are critical issues that I would also like to explore and take action on during my term.

Question 12: How often have you watched/participated in Township Committee meetings? Tell us of an agenda issue with which you agreed or disagreed.

I have been watching the Township Committee meetings pretty regularly since November 2020, and don't think I've missed that many since May 2021 when I started writing about them for The Village Green.

If I was a member of the Township Committee, I would have advocated for more transparency and community forums around turfing Dehart Park. While I recognize the efforts of the TC to fix the fields ahead of the 2022 season, given the lack of fields and poor conditions, I agree with the critique that the issue was hidden on the agenda under "fields" and "Dehart Park." I believe it was a big enough infrastructure project that warranted a public forum, perhaps by way of a town hall with the Hilton Neighborhood Association. As I mentioned earlier, working with different stakeholders to find common ground on policies is an area that I have experience in and feel I would bring to the table.

Question 13: Please share what (if anything) the Township can do to be more equitable and inclusive.

I believe the town can be more inclusive around children with disabilities and adults with sensory challenges. While it is great to host standalone events, like movies at The Woodland, it would be helpful to make “regular” community events more inclusive by providing sensory friendly options. Perhaps there are special early hours that families with children who have sensitivities to large crowds can attend, or a separate area that could be set aside for families with children who need a less chaotic atmosphere. I have many friends who have neuro-diverse children and have expressed their desires for more inclusivity in Township programming.

I also support looking at the feasibility of providing universal swim lessons to kids, without needing a membership to the Maplewood Community Pool. I believe access to free or inexpensive swim lessons is a public health concern. As a business owner, I understand the goal of creating a self-sustaining pool. However, if we truly want our pool to live up to its name as a “community” pool, then we need to talk about how the high-priced membership fees and member-only access to programming like swim lessons make this public amenity inequitable.

Section C - Commitment to Democratic Party Values

Question 14: In what year did you become a registered Democrat? Have you ever affiliated with any other political party? If so, when and why?

I have been a registered Democrat for as long as I remember, or for as long as I knew to affiliate with a party! A woman’s right to choose what happens to her own body is the number one reason I identified as a Democrat from a very young age.

Question 15: Please review the platform of the Democratic party (<https://democrats.org/where-we-stand/party-platform/>).

(a) What is one aspect of the party platform that resonates the most with you or is particularly important to you and why?

This is the section that resonates most with me: “As Democrats, we fundamentally believe health care is a right for all, not a privilege for the few.” AND more specifically, “Every American who needs it should be able to access mental health care or substance use disorder treatment, no matter where they live. Democrats will aggressively enforce the federal mental health and substance use disorder parity law and ensure that health insurers adequately cover mental health and substance use treatment. We will also invest in training and hiring more mental health providers, substance use disorder counselors, and peer support counselors, including by expanding funding for health clinics, especially in rural areas, and increasing access to these services through Medicaid. Trauma has a profound effect on both mental and physical health,

and Democrats will support increased training for health care professionals, educators, social workers, and other care workers in trauma-informed care and practices.”

I am grateful for the Affordable Care Act as our family is not covered by an employer plan, and the passing of this legislation and the subsidies we’ve received has made our health insurance costs more affordable. (At one point, it cost more to insure our family of five than I made per month!) However, access to mental health evaluations and support continue to be cost prohibitive for us and many families. While there are some practices that do accept insurance, the waitlists make it impractical for families who are struggling with a mental health crisis.

As reported in the [NY Times Magazine on March 23, 2022](#):

“It would be easy to blame the pandemic for changes in mental health that have been observed since March 2020. But in December, when [the surgeon general noted a “mental-health crisis” among young people](#), he made clear that rising numbers of children and young adults were struggling with anxiety and depression *before* Covid-19. Between 2013 and 2019, A.D.H.D. and anxiety were the most common mental disorders among those 3 to 17 years old, with each condition affecting roughly one in 11 children, according to the C.D.C. More than one in five 12- to 17-year-olds experienced a major depressive episode. Yet in 2019, fewer than 15 percent of [children between the ages of 5 and 17 received some kind of mental-health treatment.](#)”

I have been touched personally by mental health challenges, substance use disorders, and trauma. I have had to skip developmental evaluations and therapies for my children because of cost. As I study programs, policies, and grant funding that might make mental health treatment more affordable for our residents in Maplewood, I will continue to talk about mental health to help normalize the conversation.

[\(b\) Do you have any personal or professional considerations or issue positions that are in conflict with the Democratic Party Platform or that would limit your ability to advance the Democratic Party Platform? If yes, please explain.](#)

I am in support of the Democratic Party Platform, although I would take their position on affordable child care a little bit further. They write “Democrats will make major investments in quality, affordable child care, including by significantly increasing the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit and providing access to affordable, high-quality child care on a sliding scale by boosting funding for grants to states to help low-income and middle-class families afford child care.”

I prefer and support the plan [Elizabeth Warren](#) released during her presidential campaign, as follows:

“Here’s how it works:

- The federal government will partner with local providers — states, cities, school districts, nonprofits, tribes, faith-based organizations — to create a network of child care options that would be available to every family.
- These options would include locally-licensed child care centers, preschool centers, and in-home child care options.
- Local communities would be in charge, but providers would be held to high national standards to make sure that no matter where you live, your child will have access to quality care and early learning.
- Child care and preschool workers will be doing the educational work that teachers do, so they will be paid like comparable public school teachers.

And here's the best part. The federal government will pick up a huge chunk of the cost of operating these new high-quality options. That allows local providers to provide access for free to any family that makes less than 200% of the federal poverty line. That means free coverage for millions of children.”

Section D – Conclusion

Question 16: What is one thing about you that every member of the MDC should know before they are deciding on a vote to endorse you?

I am dedicated and passionate, and I love Maplewood. I work hard, listen to all sides, and do my best to bring people together and build community. I support the MDC's recent ballot reform and I am excited to throw my name into the primary race and work with Kurt Kiley to cap campaign financing and offer transparency and choice to the residents of Maplewood. I am truly excited by the opportunity to serve the Township of Maplewood and be a voice for families with young children, which is a rapidly growing part of our town's demographic, as well as small business owners, which I believe are the heart of our town.