

FEATURED

Bussman, Gudger on the issues

May 5, 2018



Cullman City Council President and candidate for Alabama Senate District 4 Garlan Gudger, left, and incumbent State Senator Paul Bussman makes speaks to a gathered audience at a Republican candidate forum held at Fairview Town Hall.

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Editor's Note

Ahead of the June 5 primary election, The Cullman Times is asking local candidates in contested races to share their thoughts on issues relevant to the office they're seeking. This week, we talk with incumbent Alabama Senator Paul Bussman and his challenger, Garlan Gudger.

Alabama State Senate District 4 covers portions of four counties and a population of more than 130,000 people. How do the issues vary in this district and what are the challenges of representation for the voters?

Paul Bussman: The counties in District 4 vary a great deal. Each county has its individual identity and way of life. Some counties are doing very well economically while others struggle at times. Different forms of government are found across the district. One county requires citizens to vote on any local legislation. Another county commission does not have a full-time commission chairman and the chairman changes every nine months. One county has a very strong healthcare system, and the other counties have rural hospitals that are barely getting by. The hospital in Haleyville was suddenly scheduled to close on December 31, 2017. By working with the mayor and county commission, we were able to prevent that closing and also improve the healthcare opportunities for those citizens.

Access to the interstate system varies as well, with some counties having easy access while others have no four-lane highway access to the interstate system. We are addressing highway access needs for all counties.

How schools are funded is different across the district. There is easy access to career training in our community college system for some, but others have to travel a significant distance to access that training. Citizens have voted for additional taxes for schools in parts of the district, while other parts have voted against additional taxes for schools. Winston County, for example, has a large portion of the county declared national forests, so no property tax can be collected on that land. That limits their opportunities for growth, and I am talking to the Trump administration about assistance to those counties with a large national forest component.

Each county has very different needs, and because I travel my district routinely, I understand those differences. I go to every county several times a month to make myself available to solve the many different issues that arise. By clearly understanding the individual needs of each county, I have been very effective in providing the necessary solutions for growth.

Garlan Gudger: The counties have similarities and certainly face a lot of the same problems. Some of those are inadequate road and bridge maintenance, lack of education funds, mental health care deficiencies, and drug problems, to name a few.

From my extensive campaigning in the four counties, and listening to the people in those communities, I have learned they all have different issues and concerns. No two families are alike, and the same holds true for each county, city, town, community and neighborhood. My task is to listen to their concerns and issues. That knowledge will guide me to make decisions and vote in Montgomery in the manner that best represents them. Understanding we have differences and listening is the way to find out how to truly help.



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Alabama leans heavily on sales taxes, which feeds mainly into the education budget. Should Alabama look more to property taxes or embark on tax reform to better fund Medicaid, courts, prisons and other services?

Paul Bussman: Alabama is today experiencing some of the highest revenues in its history. But it is still not enough.

When I was first elected, the state was broke. All the rainy-day funds were gone and we had experienced proration for multiple years. That proration hit as high as 20 percent. In just short of eight years, we now have the lowest unemployment in Alabama's history. We have not ever had

proration since I was elected, and we have paid back all the rainy-day funds early. That is prioritizing and using conservative values.

Using this conservative philosophy, we can continue to fix serious issues like Medicaid and prisons. The first thing most legislators want to do when a serious issue arises is raise taxes. The cigarette tax and the gas tax are prime examples of poorly-thought-through solutions. I have fought all of those knee-jerk reactions and looked for better solutions. I think we pay enough taxes. The Legislature needs to prioritize those needs and apply the appropriate funding to each. We can do that by giving more flexibility in the budgeting process.

The government will spend everything available and still want more. My job is to study budgets and clearly understand how the government spends money. I take that responsibility very seriously and do not see the need to take more money out of our citizens' pockets through additional property taxes or any other tax.

Garlan Gudger: I'm proud that Alabama is one of the lowest-tax states, and I want to keep it that way. But we need to be smarter on whom and what we tax. We are one of the few states that taxes food. Let's eliminate that and put that money back into the economy, while at the same time reforming how the state gives out tax credits to certain entities. I am against corporate cronyism, especially special tax credits and carve-outs that been on the books for decades without the necessary oversight. Give the money back to the people as a whole — instead of the connected few.

The state's economy has enjoyed low unemployment over the last year, but there is growing concern about the available workforce and wages. What are your recommendations for increased training and higher wages for Alabama workers?

Paul Bussman: There are several steps to this issue that I have been actively working on. We must do a better job informing our children of the tremendous opportunities that are available in the trades. I have been discussing that exposure to the trades with our state board of education. Once they know those opportunities are available, then we have to provide the needed educational tools to produce high quality employees for our industries.

The legislature has identified several areas that need immediate attention in the career training area, and we are funding those critical needs today. Community colleges can no longer get the leftover funding from higher education. I have been very instrumental in educating my colleagues on

the disadvantages facing our community college system. The community college will be the foundation for future career training and development.

We must stop duplicating educational services and focus on targeted solutions. We must also work on the soft skills that are required to make an average employee a great employee. This requires the employee to understand that they must come ready to work every day. They must come to work drug free. Through education and soft skills, I am confident that we will be able to provide a talented work force that can rely on a good wage.

Garlan Gudger: We are on the right track. Unemployment in Cullman is the second lowest in the state, and that's a good thing. As a business owner, I know how much a good workforce matters, and it starts with our education system. It is unacceptable to be falling behind our peer states in education rankings. Companies look at those kind of metrics prior to deciding which state to begin production in. I was brought up under the impression that if you want more in life, you work harder.

Now, with that being said, we must provide the training opportunities for those in the workforce to take on new challenges in order to better him or herself. Our primary goal needs to be to provide our children with a better life than we had. For higher wages, I simply feel we need to provide people with the opportunity to grow professionally, which will translate into higher pay. Our greatest enemy is complacency.

Drug addiction and mental healthcare are in the spotlight across Alabama. How can the state do a better job in addressing these two issues?

Paul Bussman: I see these two issues as the basis for many of our State problems including crime, poverty, broken homes and prison overcrowding. For the last few years, I have pushed for more targeted spending in these areas. However, I do not think that this will be a one-size-fits-all solution. Dealing with these issues will require local solutions with funding from the state. What will work in Cullman County may not work in Winston County or Jefferson County.

I am actively involved in just such a program right now to address the issues in Cullman County. I have already prepped my colleagues in the legislature that we will be presenting a pilot program for funding in 2019. Funding drug and mental health issues is critical, and I was instrumental in passing additional funding for mental health this past year. That funding will provide \$50 million more for mental health issues.

I have also been actively involved in mental health issues facing our children in schools. Many children are suffering from mental health issues, and with additional funds, these children can be treated earlier and more successfully. The Legislature provided much needed funding for behavioral mental health issues. I will continue to support additional funding for these programs as they will improve multiple areas of concern.

Garlan Gudger: The problem is funding. Yes, the Legislature added 11 million dollars to the Mental Health budget this year. But the new money was only added because of a lawsuit, and was actually less than the settlement required. That \$11 million will not improve funding for basic outpatient services at mental health centers. It will only fund a limited set of new services required by the settlement.

Our state is funding core outpatient mental health services at the same dollar amount as 15 years ago. Inflation and population growth over 15 years of flat funding make providing adequate service and recruiting and retaining counselors harder and harder. There are not enough group homes or other supervised living for those who need residential care, which exhausts family members and often results in homelessness. Significant General Fund cuts to mental health caused the closure of most of the state hospital beds, including North Alabama Regional Hospital in Decatur. This has put more pressure on local emergency rooms and psychiatric hospitals, because there are few options for inpatient care — especially for the indigent.

Public mental health treatment should be considered part of our state and local infrastructure — just like roads, police and schools. People expect mental health and addiction treatment to be there when it is needed for public safety and the health and success of our families. But we have to fund it in a realistic and reliable way.

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