



2021
TOWN
ELECTION



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BOARD OF HEALTH

CATHERINE VG VAN PRAAGH

FINAL CANDIDATE STATEMENT ~ MARCH 8, 2021

I am really encouraged to see such a strong interest in the work of the Board of Health, particularly at such a critical juncture in the public health of our community. In contributing to the future activities of the Board, I look forward to bringing my education, skills, and life experience, specifically:

- Over 25 years as a microbiologist, with a diverse background in environmental microbiology, DNA vaccine development, infectious disease, human health and safety.
- As the lab manager and Environmental Health and Safety officer for a biological research laboratory, direct involvement in planning and executing up-to-date safety protocols to allow our researchers to continue to function safely during the pandemic.
- Strong connections to Bedford with children in the school system and parents living in town.

As Bedford moves from pandemic crisis to pandemic recovery, I will work with the BOH to develop clear, reliable guidance for our community and businesses to help Bedford citizens make informed decisions as we open back up. Bedford is a diverse town, and I am well aware that public health decisions must balance both individual and community needs. The coming year offers a great deal of hope for us all as infection rates go down and vaccination rates go up. More than ever, people will need access to resources for mental health and substance abuse issues, as well as the financial impacts of the economic downturn. At the same time, long-term issues such as tick and mosquito-borne diseases will continue to need our attention.

I would be honored to have the opportunity to contribute to that effort as a member of the Board of Health, and I would appreciate your vote on March 13.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

- [Abby Hafer](#)
- [Sarah Blackman and Meg McAllister](#)
- [Doug Muder](#)

QUESTIONS ~ LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS

What would you identify as lessons learned in Bedford's response to the current pandemic in relationship to the role of the Board of Health?

As a general whole, the Board of Health has responded well to a very difficult situation. When Bedford became one of the earliest sites of infection in the state, their rapid response, development of the COVID dashboard, and the sensible guidance provided to our community and businesses was impressive. One of the primary things Covid has highlighted is the need for more and better platforms of communication. Many folks are unaware of how to get the information they need or who to contact to address concerns, which can cause unnecessary confusion and anxiety.

What resources will you use to inform your decisions as a member of the Board of Health?

The CDC, MA Department of Public Health, and peer-reviewed studies will inform my decisions as a member of the Board of Health. I will apply my education in microbiology and my knowledge as a lab manager to understand the issues at hand. I will use my experience from working in both a long-term care facility and a public health clinic to find practical solutions to real life problems. Having both aging relatives in town and children in the school system, I am aware there are a broad array of needs in Bedford that require different approaches to address them successfully.

INITIAL STATEMENT

My name is Catherine Van Praagh, and I am seeking your vote for a seat on the Bedford Board of Health. As a microbiologist with over 25 years of experience in a wide variety of scientific and medical areas, I have been following the activities of the Board of Health for quite some time; and the current pandemic has greatly motivated me to offer my skills and expertise to the town.

My professional background has given me a deep understanding and appreciation of public health and the roles of front-line medical workers and research scientists in efforts to prevent disease. As a young adult, I worked as a Nurse's Aide in a long-term care facility, then went on to earn both a B.S. and an M.S. in microbiology from UMass Amherst. While working on my graduate degree in molecular genetics and bioremediation, I volunteered my time at a local free healthcare clinic, working with various at-risk populations. I spent several

years working on DNA-based vaccines in the pharmaceutical industry, followed by over a decade teaching microbiology to nursing students at Middlesex Community College. I am currently the laboratory manager of the Group 23 Biological Labs at MIT Lincoln Labs where I support ongoing research as well as assist staff as we pivot to address the pandemic. As the Environmental Health and Safety representative, I am well versed in the constantly evolving research and data around the pandemic and have used that information to develop systems and adaptations to keep our labs operational while preventing the spread of COVID within our research team.

The coming year is going to be challenging for every community in the country, and our Board of Health's vision has never been more important: "Helping neighbors live healthy lives in Bedford". We've already seen how adaptive everyone has needed to be during this pandemic, and that will continue to be true as we address the new, more highly infectious COVID variants circulating in the population, roll out vaccinations for our residents and recover from the pandemic.

I have an enormous amount of hope for the future, and I see the Board of Health playing a critical role in navigating potential pitfalls along the way. More than ever, we'll need to work collaboratively with other town volunteers and staff as we navigate a return to normalcy. Our schools, elder services, and businesses will need sensible guidance to stay both as safe and functional as possible during this period of high risk, just as they will need guidance on how to best open up more completely as the risk recedes. Developing clear guidelines and adaptations that folks feel confident in are keys to our community's health.

The pandemic and economic downturn have impacted all of us in many ways, and the Board of Health must also continue to raise awareness of the availability of mental health, employment, education, financial, and addiction services, with an eye toward expanding them as needed. We'll need to continue to focus on other ongoing public health concerns facing our town – mosquito and tick-borne illness such as Eastern Equine Encephalitis, West Nile virus, and Lyme Disease, suicide prevention, heart disease, domestic violence, tobacco and vaping are just a few that come to mind.

My commitment to Bedford is strong: my husband, Andrew, and I have two children in the Bedford school system and my parents and father-in-law all reside here as well. I have had ties to the community dating back to the 1980s, when I frequently visited my grandmother who lived for many decades at Carleton Willard Village. My husband and I lived here as we started our careers and fell in love with this community, deepening our attachment to Bedford through close friends, church membership and participation in community events. When the opportunity arose to purchase a home in Bedford, we jumped at the chance to put down roots and raise our family here.

I would be grateful to have the chance to give back to the community by joining these efforts and I would be honored to offer my skills to the Board of Health. I look forward to having this opportunity to serve Bedford and I respectfully ask for your vote on March 13