

Strong education credentials square off in 96th

LUCY TOBIER
LTTOBIER@LNPNEWS.COM

Two Manheim Township educators from opposite sides of the political aisle are vying for control of the 96th District. Democratic incumbent Nikki Rivera will face Republican Babita Rusyn, a former scientist and current adjunct professor at Stony Brook University, at the polls.

The district, which is 47% Democrat and 34% Republican, has been Democrat-led for decades. Mike Sturla, who represented the 96th District for nearly 35 years, was the only state-level Lancaster County Democrat for most of his career.

In 2024, state and local Democratic party leaders selected Rivera as Sturla's successor. Rivera, then president of the Manheim Township school board, beat Republican businessman Eric Beezer with 60% of the vote.

Rivera and Rusyn ran unopposed in their party primaries this May, with Rivera receiving 3,000 more votes in the primary than Rusyn.

The two candidates were asked to respond to a short list of questions ahead of the general election. Below are their responses.

NIKKI RIVERA (D)



Age: 54.
Residence: Manheim Township.
Education: Bachelor's degree, University of Pittsburgh; teaching certificate, Shippensburg University.
Occupation: State representative.
Family: Husband and five children, ages 19 to 30.

What is your position on data center development and regulation in Pennsylvania?

I value local control and due diligence regarding zoning ordinances to reflect local needs and values. I expect large industries to be accountable for the resources they consume.

What do you see as the most important issues to address in the 96th District if elected?

Affordability of housing, utilities, food and healthcare, fair funding for education, and wages that match the cost of living.

How do you plan to address affordability concerns in the region?

This has been an ongoing issue. I am the prime sponsor of an energy storage bill that would help improve electricity reliability and lower electricity bills. In addition, I co-sponsored numerous pieces of legislation to address the housing crisis, energy costs, and I supported additional money for schools to help offset property tax increases.

What uniquely qualifies you to represent your district?

Thirty years of teaching plus eight years serving on school board and raising five diverse children has given me leadership experience and skills, and a can-do attitude to serve the constituents of the 96th District. I demonstrate open-mindedness to understand various viewpoints and to govern effectively.



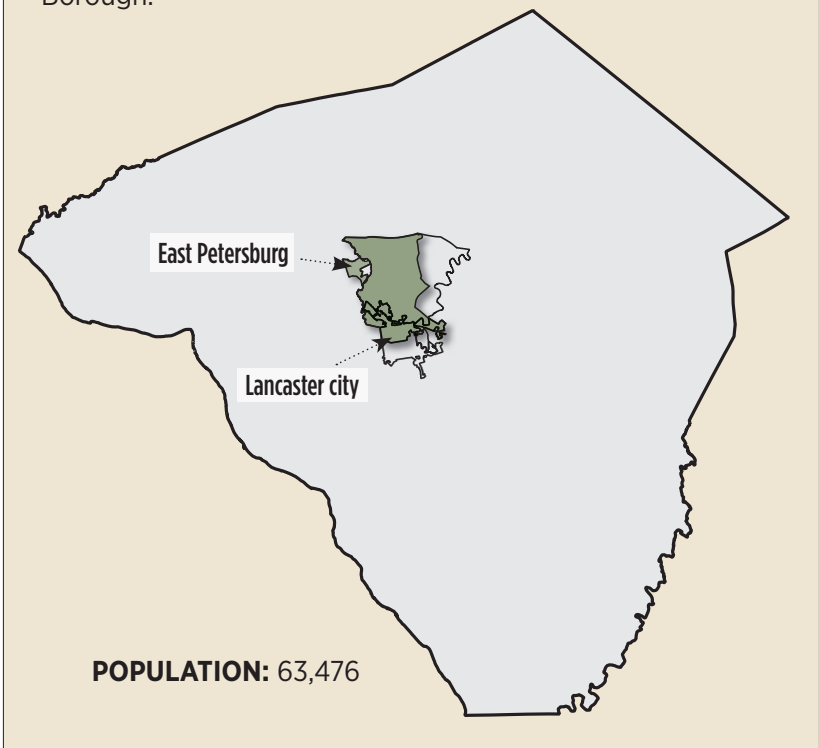
Age: 45.
Residence: Manheim Township.
Education: Bachelor's degrees in biochemistry and psychology, Stony Brook University; master's degree candidate in legal studies, Texas A&M School of Law.
Occupation: Adjunct Instructor/educator.
Family: Husband Jacob, and children Lily and Luke.

What is your position on data center development and regulation in Pennsylvania?

Voters and neighbors have made

96TH STATE HOUSE DISTRICT

The 96th District for the Pennsylvania House of Representatives still includes most of the northern half of Lancaster city — all of the 1st, 5th and 9th wards, and parts of the 2nd and 6th wards — but it now reaches farther into Manheim Township and also covers East Petersburg Borough.



POPULATION: 63,476

their feelings known about data centers, and I firmly agree with them. There should be no data centers unless they meet strict requirements on land use, utility consumption, and other local resources. I'm open to developments that strengthen our schools and neighborhoods through jobs, revenue and economic stability. But they have to earn our trust, and that means oversight by state and local officials, being fully transparent and proving they can be good neighbors. Not public nuisances or noisy compounds used to track, store and spy on our private data.

What do you see as the most important issues to address in the 96th District if elected?

As I meet voters, by far the issue

I hear about most is affordability. Voters have made it clear to me that they're not happy with my opponent's positions on this, and I believe they deserve a state representative who won't sponsor or vote for so many increases to our taxes, utility bills and other costs of living. I also believe voters want responsible budgets passed on time, not record budgets and deficit spending. As a teacher, I support strong schools, educational choice and empowering parents and teachers to have a local voice in education, not cutting scholarships or taking local decisionmaking away from our communities and giving it to bureaucrats in Harrisburg. I believe it's time for a change, and time to restore the public's trust through accountable leadership.

How do you plan to address affordability concerns in the region?

Well, when you find yourself in a fiscal hole, the first rule is to stop digging. Our Legislature should live within our means and find ways to grow our economy and tax base, not vote to spend our state savings accounts on partisan wish lists that pass on debt to our children and grandchildren. I think there are targeted proposals that make sense in the short term. Pennsylvania has one of the highest gas taxes in the nation. We can provide quick relief through a temporary gas tax holiday. We should opt in to the Federal Scholarship Tax Credit, and take advantage of new educational opportunities for students and families without spending more state dollars. And we should find ways to make Pennsylvania more competitive and welcoming to businesses that create jobs and economic opportunity.

What uniquely qualifies you to represent your district?

I served as a scientist — specifically, a forensic chemist — at the Drug Enforcement Administration for 11 years. In that job, I trained at Quantico, testified in criminal prosecutions to help put away drug traffickers, trained officers in field operations and participated in drug prevention programs in schools. I've spent the last 10 years as an educator, both at the college level and teaching STEM and other classes in Manheim Township. I'm a wife and mother to two children. I've spent much of my life not just as a public servant, but in community service and humanitarian missions. But I also believe that representing isn't just about resumes, but about listening to voters, and being accountable and responsive to them and their needs. The right candidate should listen and learn from constituents and put their interests first.

● To read the candidates' complete responses, visit [lancasteronline.com/election](https://www.lancasteronline.com/election).

Former councilwoman challenges Mentzer in 97th

JADE CAMPOS
JCAMPOS@LNPNEWS.COM

Republican Steve Mentzer faces off against an East Lampeter Township woman with government experience in a bid to win his seventh reelection campaign in the 97th House District.

His opponent, Jess Branas, a former Spanish teacher, has served as a staffer in the state House and a councilwoman for Upper Darby Township in Delaware County. She counts her successful 2023 campaign in Upper Darby as a significant win for the Democratic Party, as the council seat had previously been held by a Republican.

Mentzer has served the mostly suburban district since 2012. As a GOP incumbent, he is the front-runner in a race where 52% of registered voters are Republicans and 30% are Democrats. In 2024, Mentzer won 62% of the vote against his Democratic opponent, online radio host Bob Rudy.

Democrats have gained some ground over the last several years in the 97th District, which wraps around Lancaster city to the south and east. East Lampeter voters picked Democrat Josh Shapiro over Republican Doug Mastriano for governor in 2022, and West Lampeter Township voters last year elected the first Democratic township supervisor in recent memory.

Branas and Mentzer were asked to respond to a short list of questions ahead of the general election. Below are their responses.

JESS BRANAS (D)



Age: 49.
Residence: East Lampeter Township.
Education: Bachelor's degree in Spanish, University of Pittsburgh; master's degree in Spanish, Millersville University.
Occupation: Educator, consultant.
Family: Parents John and Arlene Branas and sister Jennifer Branas Kidwell.

What uniquely qualifies you to represent your district?

As someone who has always been in a career that was paycheck-to-

paycheck and a cancer survivor helping with her aging parents, I face the same challenges and realities of skyrocketing costs as most of the voters across all parties. I will passionately bring and advocate for practical solutions to the pressing issues affecting us all. I know how to get results by working across the aisle, drawing on my experience in Harrisburg as a district director for a state representative. As a previously elected councilwoman, I learned to collaborate with state and local officials to represent constituents' best interests. This is a grassroots campaign, as I am accountable to the voters, not lobbyists and big donors. I believe in transparent, open and civil dialogue with all voters and being accessible, which seems to be currently lacking. We need to invest in people and communities, not just the elites.

What do you see as the most important issues to address in the 97th District if elected?

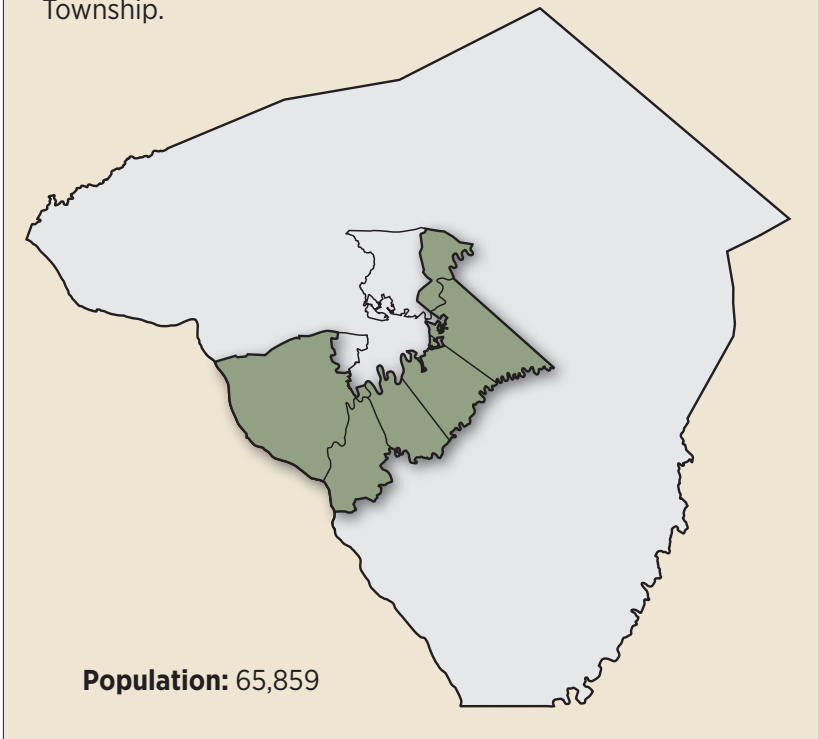
I have talked with over 7,000 voters across the 97th and all parties, and heard the same concerns: skyrocketing utility costs, access to affordable healthcare, investing in our children, including underfunded public schools with high tax burdens, ballooning housing and rent costs, and the threat of generative AI and data centers in our communities. People said they were tired of the chaos in Washington and decisions like the tariffs and the Iran War, which have further increased everyday costs. They are tired of government corruption and want representatives to focus on pressing issues rather than the chaos.

How do you plan to address affordability concerns in Lancaster County and across Pennsylvania?

We need to act to slow skyrocketing costs across multiple areas. For utilities, we are slow to add energy to the grid, and we need to push both the PUC and PJM to fast-track projects. We need to maintain current energy sources while increasing renewable options, giving residents freedom to control their own energy needs. We are the 47th state to add renewable energy. PA is the largest energy ex-

97TH STATE HOUSE DISTRICT

The 97th District of the Pennsylvania House includes Manor, Conestoga, Pequea, West Lampeter and East Lampeter townships, as well as a western portion of Manheim Township.



Population: 65,859

porter, but we should first cap and lower cumulative rate increases. Health insurance companies make billions in profit but keep raising our costs. We need to regulate premium increases to inflation and indexes while helping expand coverage — especially for small-business workers — which will also lower costs. We need to collaborate with developers to expand a cross-section of housing and rental development while also limiting big corporations from buying up all the inventory.

What is your position on data center development and regulation in Pennsylvania?

Until data centers are regulated to protect our people and not fleece our communities, there should be no further data center construction in PA. This will give municipalities time to fully examine and address issues around power and water use, noise and more in ways that work with our communities. In addition, we need data center regulations that require transparency and require them to pay for all their power and upgrades so

residents do not foot the bill. Beyond data centers, we need to update our laws and statutes to keep pace with the technology. Generative AI itself needs regulation to provide transparency when insurance companies use it to deny you coverage, protect our children from harmful content, protect our seniors from scams, and provide other common-sense protections.

STEVE MENTZER (R)



Age: 69.
Residence: Manheim Township.
Education: Manheim Township High School, attended Elizabethtown College.
Occupation: Legislator.
Family: Wife Sally Mentzer, children Marc Mentzer and Lynn Conant, four grandchildren and one brother.

What uniquely qualifies you to represent your district?

My lifelong connection to our

community combined with my experience both in the real world and effectively fighting for our families in Harrisburg makes me uniquely qualified to continue representing the 97th District. I believe representing the needs of our community means understanding our community — and I do as someone who was born and raised in Lancaster County and raised his own children here as well. I know the issues you care about — from big issues like improving education to local issues like infrastructure projects that improve our daily quality of life. I then bring my experience as a business person, philanthropist and legislator to the fight to address those issues by bringing together Republicans and Democrats to craft solutions that work.

What do you see as the most important issues to address in the 97th District if elected?

We need to address helping every worker, family and senior citizen to better be able to afford the cost of everyday life. In Harrisburg, I have done this by working for both real fiscal discipline that focuses state spending on our priorities. Chief among those priorities is education — and I have supported bipartisan budgets that deliver record school funding that helps both kids and property taxpayers. I have voted for historic tax decreases that would reduce the cost of utilities. I helped expand the property tax and rent rebate to help more people than ever before. I support “tax holidays” that remove the tax on important everyday items. And I have stopped broad-based tax increases to make sure you can keep more of what you earn.

How do you plan to address affordability concerns in Lancaster County and across Pennsylvania?

One of the biggest drivers of inflation is the unchecked growth of government spending. That is why I have always been a leading voice in Harrisburg to respect taxpayers and better control spending. I have done this by working with Republicans and Democrats to pass bipartisan budgets that don't raise broad-based taxes and that focus the dollars we do spend on the programs that help

97th DISTRICT, page D9