While the Democratic presidential primary on March 17 burns up civic oxygen nationwide, there are three key contests at home, including two races in which local Democrats hope to increase their power in the region’s most populated county. The “move forward” transportation levy has the potential to shift the region’s course, boosting public transportation and infrastructure spending. Democrats will pick a successor to the late Commissioner Todd Portune, while in the 1st Congressional District, they’ll pick someone to make yet another run against U.S. Rep. Steve Chabot. Because of the national political winds, it could be his toughest race yet after a career full of them.
Political vets Pillich, Reece compete for Portune seat

Two veteran Democratic politicians are running to be their party’s nominee to take the county commission seat held for 19 years by Portune. Victoria Parks, chosen to replace him, is not running.

It’s a testament to how Democrats now believe they can dominate Hamilton County that former state Reps. Alicia Reece and Connie Pillich are competing for the seat. Pillich is expected to easily outspend Reece, who believes she will overcome the onslaught with a grassroots campaign. Perennial candidate Kelli Prather also is in the race. The winner will face Republican Andy Black, a former Mariemont council member, in November.

Unlike the Hamilton County Democratic primary for sheriff, there is no big left-center ideological divide between Reece and Pillich. Both pitch themselves as experienced officeholders.

Pillich argues she is more electable, having faced tougher races in a gerrymandered district in the county’s suburbs, while Reece served in a safe Democratic seat centered in the city.

Reece contends she’s the better dealmaker, winning seven elections and working across party lines with former Gov. John Kasich and former council member (and current state Supreme Court justice) Pat DeWine to get things done in Columbus and at City Hall.
The Courier asked both candidates about major issues facing the county:

**Convention center hotel deal/expansion**

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**CANDIDATE BIOS**

**Connie Pillich**

**Age:** 59  
**Residence:** Montgomery  
**Political experience:** member of the Ohio House, 2009-2014; Democratic nominee for state treasurer, 2014; ran briefly for governor in 2018  
**Career:** Attorney, U.S. Air Force captain  
**Family:** Husband, Paul Forshey, two children  
**Education:** J.D. from the University of Cincinnati College of Law; MBA from the University of North Dakota; bachelor’s from the University of Oklahoma

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**Alicia Reece**

**Age:** 48  
**Residence:** Roselawn  
**Political experience:** Member of Cincinnati City Council 1999-2005; candidate for mayor, 2005; member of the Ohio House, 2010-2018  
**Career:** Marketing and advertising, including deputy director of the state tourism office and interim director of the state film office  
**Family:** Single  
**Education:** Bachelor’s from Grambling State University
Pillich endorses the county’s decision to chip in its surplus hotel tax money to acquire and demolish the Millennium Hotel with the hopes of building at least a new convention center hotel. She’s waiting to see the results of a Cincinnati Business Committee study of the region’s convention and arena needs before weighing in on an expansion of the convention center itself.

“The convention center is very important to a big chunk of industry in this town,” she said. “Our business community needs a decision maker who is level-headed and calm.”

Reece was noncommittal about what the county has done but said she believes the convention center itself needs to be expanded.

“Ultimately we do need an (convention center) expansion and a hotel to go with it. It has to be built for the future, not just the next five years.”

Sales tax increase for county operations

Pillich declined to say whether she thought the commissioners’ unanimous decision in 2019 to increase the sales tax by 0.25% to deal with the county’s structurally unbalanced budget was the correct course of action. Two of the commissioners that made that decision, Denise Driehaus and Portune, have endorsed Pillich, however.

Reece said the voters should have decided.

“That’s something you should be able to sell to the people.”

Economic development
Both Reece and Pillich pledged to give more attention to areas outside of Cincinnati’s urban core, including inner-ring suburbs that have yet to see the same kind or resurgence as has the core. But beyond better outreach, communication and leveraging the county’s existing funds, neither offered specific plans. Pillich said she did want to find a dedicated funding stream for the Port of Greater Cincinnati Development Authority, whose mission includes preparing underutilized or vacant industrial land for use by advanced manufacturers.

“Downtown Cincinnati is the economic driver of this region, but we have a lot of real estate in this county and we also need to develop outside the city. Not everyone is as lucky as a place like Blue Ash,” Pillich said. “We need to not only be building new office space, new retail ... we have to remember that our neighborhoods in Hamilton County have lovely character and retain local business. We have to retain housing that is affordable by a broad variety of incomes.”

Reece said the county should be an economic development leader, not simply signing off on deals brought to it by the business community.

“I want a county that’s affordable. I want us to be a place where people come and say, ‘How did they do it?’” she said. “If government says we want to focus on X, private investment says we can come over here too. That’s where we can provide a leadership role.”

**Metro government**

Neither Reece nor Pillich had enthusiasm for creating a metropolitan wide government in the mold of Louisville or Indianapolis, which business leaders have been chattering about for decades, believing some combination could simplify government and drive growth. Both support Issue 7, the transportation tax to expand the bus system throughout Hamilton County and provide more money for road and bridge repair.
“Our focus now has to make sure we’re delivering for the citizens,” Reece said. “I tend to think right now within the existing system there are opportunities that we can and must do better.”

“I just don’t see any movement towards that for a very, very long time. I’m thinking decades. We have a lot of beautiful communities and very proud independent communities who want to keep that,” Pillich said.

A new arena

Pillich ruled out using the sales tax to build a new arena to replace Heritage Bank Center.

“The voters have no appetite for that,” she said. “The arena does need to be improved. I’m hopeful the owners want to follow through on their old plans to improve it.”

Reece said she wants to work with the owners of existing arenas, the University of Cincinnati’s Fifth Third Arena and Xavier University’s Cintas Center, to see if there are ways to utilize them to meet some of the region’s convention and concert needs.

“That’s what I’m good at – bringing people together as one Hamilton County. Are there some synergies that we can work on to bring more money, more events?”

However, Reece said to compete with the region’s neighboring cities, Cincinnati may need a new arena.
Newcomers Foster, Schroder compete to take on Chabot

Two political novices are running for the Democratic nomination to face off against Chabot, R-Westwood, who defeated Hamilton County Clerk of Courts Aftab Pureval by only 4 percentage points in 2018.

Kate Schroder of Clifton and Nikki Foster of Mason believe their newcomer status and gender will be an asset against Chabot, who has repeatedly bested a who’s who of rising Democratic stars.

Both say health care is the race’s top issue. Schroder worked as a longtime executive with the Clinton Health Access Initiative in Washington and overseas, while Foster is a veteran Air Force pilot on leave from her career at General Electric Aviation.

“My 20-year career (in health care) has been the No. 1 issue for voters. I’ve managed $70 million budgets over five countries,” Schroder said.

On why she is most electable, Foster said, “In 2018, five female veterans flipped seats just like this one. The proof is in the data.”
“They continue to prioritize corporations over people,” Foster said.

“They were billed as something that would help expand businesses and improve wages,” Schroder said. “That hasn’t happened. The majority ... went to stock buybacks.”

**Free trade**

Trade without tariffs and other barriers used to be an article of faith for Republicans, but that has changed under Trump, who has slapped tariffs on Chinese goods and started a trade war. Schroder and Foster spoke in general terms about their positions.

“It’s as much fair trade as it is free trade,” Schroder said. “They’re picking winners and losers. The American consumers are the ones paying for these.”

Foster said she worried that too much free trade moves jobs overseas.

“That’s why (Sen.) Sherrod (Brown) holds those positions,” Foster said. “Sometimes wages can be driven down by too much free trade. We have to find a happy medium.”

**Infrastructure and the Brent Spence Bridge**

Both blasted Chabot for not doing more to fund the $2.6 billion Brent Spence Bridge project, which calls for wider highways on both sides of the river and a second span alongside the existing bridge. Both believe the federal government should contribute to the Western Hills Viaduct project, even though it is a local bridge with mostly local traffic.

Foster declined to say whether the feds should pay the whole bill or whether local residents should share the cost by paying a toll, urging collaboration and finding middle ground.
Each was asked about major issues facing the U.S. and the region:

**Trump tax cuts**

Both say they opposed the 2017 Trump tax cuts, but neither specified which parts they would reverse if elected.
Schroder said it was unlikely the federal government would pay for the entire bridge but said tolls should be a last resort. In 2018, both Chabot and Pureval said they opposed tolls.

Schroder wants to partner with other jurisdictions with major infrastructure problems to set aside some of the money they send to Washington to fund such projects.

“We are a region that gives way more in federal tax dollars than we get in return. Tolling isn’t the only idea,” Schroder said. “I know engineers that won’t drive across it. It’s a huge problem we absolutely have to fix.”

**Earmarks**

Republican banned earmarks in legislation more than a decade ago, preventing individual lawmakers from inserting spending into legislation that would benefit their districts.

Schroder favors a reformed earmarks process that would require the lawmaker who inserted an earmark to be identified and for federal money to go only to public projects, not private ones.

“I am open to anything that helps brings resources, investments and jobs to this community,” she said. “As a member of Congress, your job is not only to have good sound judgment on policy decisions but ... also to bring back resources and investments.”

Foster said members need to push for their district’s needs but did not directly say whether she would favor bringing back earmarks in some form.

**Health care**
Schroder and Foster favor a public option to the Affordable Care Act and say that the GOP decision to eliminate the individual mandate led to increasing health care costs and numbers of uninsured.

Schroder would be open to looking at Medicare for All if a bill was put before her. She also supports expanding Medicare by reducing the eligibility age. The government also must be able to negotiate prescription drug prices, she said. The pharmaceutical industry needs to transition to a high-volume, low-margin business model instead of the low volume, high-margin that exists today and makes some drugs too expensive, she said.

“The key metrics would be – does it improve access, does it improve affordability and quality? We need to ensure universal coverage,” Schroder said of any changes to the Affordable Care Act. “We pay for patients anyway when they show up in the emergency room. We are among the top spenders and getting the least value from our health care system.”

Foster was less definitive about Medicare for All.

“I don’t like to talk in absolutes,” she said. “If that (Medicare for All) were to come up, I think a lot of people in this district are under private health care. It’d be very hard to implement.”

**Climate change**

Both favor reentering the Paris climate agreement, from which Trump has withdrawn. Schroder believes there needs to be a price on carbon and favors net-zero carbon emissions in the United States by 2050. Schroder endorsed Cincinnati’s efforts to build its own solar farm to power city government and said it is an example the rest of the country should emulate.

“I like the elements that really focus on investment in renewable energy,” Schroder said.
Foster endorsed GE Aviation’s efforts to reduce emissions by 40% at its plants and said the government should do likewise.

Both described the Green New Deal, a Congressional resolution that aims to remove fossil fuels from the economy, as an aspirational goal.

**Immigration**

Schroder wants to reinstate the Obama-era deferred action for childhood arrivals, that allowed undocumented immigrants brought here as children to receive renewable two-year exemptions from deportation, with the possibility of eventually getting a work permit.

“I also believe as someone who worked in international development and as a parent – they’re (entering the country illegally) as a last resort – they feel their family and children are unsafe. I think if we look at better investment in diplomacy, we can perhaps reduce the number of people who are seeking asylum. I also think we need to invest in the court system so we don’t have such a great backlog,” Schroder said.

Foster is the daughter of two immigrants and believes undocumented immigrants need a path to citizenship.

“We need to treat all humans with compassion,” she said.
Issue 7 would pay for roads, bridges, bus service

Supporters of Issue 7, a 25-year, 0.8% sales tax increase for public transportation and infrastructure feel like they’ve won already in one important respect.

Hamilton County has never passed a levy for Metro bus service, currently funded by the city’s transit earnings tax, which would be repealed. Previous levies lost by blowout margins in the three elections in which they’ve attempted.

The last one, in 2002, brought a bipartisan coalition of opponents, including U.S. Rep. Steve Chabot, Hamilton County Auditor Dusty Rhodes and former Mayor Tom Luken.

This time, the Cincinnati USA Regional Chamber, which has led the Issue 7 efforts along with Better Bus Coalition President Cam Hardy, Mayor John Cranley, Councilman P.G. Sittenfeld and Southwest Ohio Regional Transit Authority and Michelman executive Kreg Keesee, has staunch conservatives like Rhodes and Ohio House Majority Leader Bill Seitz, R-Green Township, on their side.

Supporters have painstakingly assembled a broad coalition of political, business, labor, religious and community organizations and drawn no paid opposition, either from local anti-tax groups or national ones, at least not yet. Online, critics of the plan point to the fact that Hamilton County’s total sales tax would be 7.8%, the second highest in the state, and higher than the 6.75% in Clermont County, 6.5% in Butler County, 7% in Warren County and 6% in Northern Kentucky.

“You’re trying to thread a needle,” said Pete Metz, the chamber’s transportation initiatives manager. “You also make it infinitely harder to get it done if you lose that appendage of the coalition.”
Issue 7 is the first step toward a broader, regional system, the kind favored by the late Commissioner Todd Portune.

“You’re not joining a system where the biggest player is woefully underfunded,” Meyer said.

If Issue 7 passes, bus riders would notice a difference as soon as this year, according to SORTA’s implementation plan, including 24-hour service on Metro’s six most-used routes and peak service every 10-12 minutes on two of those with greater service spans and frequencies on other routes as well.

In 2021, five of eight new routes will be up and running, including circulators in Springdale and Blue Ash and crosstown routes from Kenwood/Madeira to Anderson/Newtown, Northgate to Kenwood and Green Township to Forest Park running through Cheviot, Westwood, Colerain Township and Springfield Township. None of those will require downtown connections, a major, time-saving change.

Additional new crosstown routes come online in 2022 with most updates finished by 2023. The most-frequent service will be on Routes 4 (Montgomery Road), 11 (Madison Road) and 17 (Hamilton Avenue), where, a bus will come every eight minutes during peak times.

During that time, SORTA will also be examining where to put its proposed bus-rapid transit line, which is a rail-like service using a bus, with dedicated lanes on part of the route, stations, priority at traffic signals and other features. The levy will fund a local share of such a project, but federal funding also is expected to be needed as well as community input.

The agency projects that ridership is expected to grow from 13.5 million trips now to 20 million by 2026 and 25 million by 2030. More than 20,000 jobs and 740 employers will be accessible by bus
than before the levy. A $2 base fare is built into the plan, up from $1.75 today, with $2.65 express service fare and $3.75 for Butler, Warren and Clermont counties.

"Issue 7 is about improving the quality of life for so many people in our region," Hardy said. "My great grandmother won't have to wait 45 minutes at an unprotected bus stop in the elements waiting for the bus. It means a business professional can ditch his or her car a few times a week and check emails and read documents. It means a mother of three can get access to a job paying $18 an hour instead of her current job of $10 an hour."
The chamber’s interest stems from feedback it heard from business owners concerned about talent – drawing it to the community and then being able to move it around once it got here.

“People have to be able to get where they’re going. We’re in a world where jobs are following the talent,” said Jill Meyer, the chamber’s CEO, noting that Amazon was critical of the region’s public transit. “What they said is you don’t have the talent. Mostly you don’t have any infrastructure to get them here. The fact that the business community has stepped in with the force and vigor that it has is telling.”