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## **Middletown's state Rep. Matt Lesser considering bid for Connecticut secretary of state in 2018**



Lesser speaks on the New Haven Green April 9 at a rally in support of the national popular vote bill. Contributed photo

By [Cassandra Day](#), The Middletown Press

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State Rep. Matthew Lesser, who has served the city in the General Assembly for five terms, is considering a run for secretary of the state. Contributed photo

MIDDLETOWN >> The city's [five-term legislator for the 100th District](#) has announced he has formed an exploratory committee to possibly run for secretary of the state in 2018.

[Democratic state Rep. Matt Lesser, who has been serving Middletown in the General Assembly since 2009](#), also was on the city's Planning and Zoning Commission prior to his election.

This statewide position is something Lesser has been interested in for a while, he said.

"I've been really passionate about voting rights long before I was in office," said the legislator who for six years served on the committee that oversees the secretary of state's office.

Lesser, who has spent the last few months talking to voters around the state, has heard from dozens of colleagues who would support his bid, he said.

The 33-year-old said he would only run for the office if fellow Democrat, Secretary of the State Denise W. Merrill, does not seek re-election. Merrill was a state representative for the state's 54th District, which consists of the towns of Mansfield and Chaplin, from 1995 to 2011 and has been secretary of the state since 2011.

"I'm taking a very close look at it. I still want to get out there and listen more. I haven't made a decision — I'm just exploring the run," he said.

Lesser said his constituents are interested in, and rallying more than ever around, the issues that matter to them.

“It’s channeling this enormous energy that I’ve sensed there since the election; figuring out how to get folks involved. Whether it’s fighting for voting rights or women’s rights, you’ve seen this consistent surge of energy in the last few months and it’s something I see everywhere I go.”

This grass-roots approach to garnering support for legislative work is essential, he said. “The most important thing is that people feel connected to government, that people feel the state is responsive to their needs, that their elected leaders care about them and they feel there’s a way to contact them and approach them,” said Lesser, who calls accessibility one of the key components of being a good politician.

The election of President Donald Trump seems to have energized people who may not have been active in the process of government in the past, Lesser said.

“You see new groups springing up, folks that are trying to mobilize, trying to get active that may not have paid attention to politics before this year. I think a lot of that comes from the election — not necessarily exclusively, but I think they’re really focused on where their state and their country is going,” he added.

JR Romano, chairman of the Connecticut Republican Party, said he is critical of Lesser’s candidacy.

“He’s the epitome of what’s wrong with politics. Matt has been a wildly ambitious politician since the start. I think it’s probably the worst decision if the state of Connecticut gives any more power to him. He calls people names to get his point across. He’s actually one of those people that shouts you down. And if you don’t agree with him, you’re somehow less than (him),” Romano said.

Lesser wrote the first-in-the-nation Student Loan Bill of Rights, helped author the law that kept out-of-state fracking waste from the state’s waterways, is now a lead sponsor of paid family medical leave and is working to protect the retirement of public school teachers, he said.

A survivor of testicular cancer, Lesser has been cancer-free for five years following his diagnosis in 2012. He said he is invested in legislation to expand insurance coverage for people with cancer.

He’s also eager to see Connecticut join 38 other states in allowing early voting and spearheaded legislation to change the Electoral College process.

“I introduced a bill this year to allocate Connecticut electors to whoever wins the national popular vote,” Lesser said. It would kick in only when half the states agree to do that — otherwise “we start voting against what the people want.”

The legislator said he has two big concerns about the process.

“Right now, you have people who can get elected without having those votes and I think that’s a problem. The second issue is even if the person gets elected with the most votes, you’re only paying attention to a handful of swing states and they’re not paying attention to the issues that matter to us in Connecticut — so having them have to campaign for our vote I think is helpful,” Lesser said.

The city consistently has been among municipalities with the highest percentage of voter turnout.

In 2013, the [city was awarded Merrill’s Democracy Challenge Cup](#) for generating the highest voter turnout in a municipality with a population of 15,000 or more, coming in at nearly 90 percent in the presidential election.

“We’re off the charts and I think that civic engagement is something Middletown should be proud of,” Lesser said. “Middletown has always had really strong city identity. We’ve got community engagement and are really focused on what happens here,” Lesser said. “That plus the quality of our schools and our civic education really has people caring what happens locally — and statewide and nationally. It’s a community that cares,” he added.

Lesser has served on a number of committees, including being co-chairman of the General Assembly’s Banking Committee, and is a member of the Government Administration and Elections Committee and the Insurance and Real Estate Committee. He has [championed the development of Middletown’s waterfront](#) and its [connection to the Mattabassett District Sewage Treatment Plant, among other initiatives](#).

He lives in the city’s North End with his wife of one year, Sarah, and their Labrador mix Lucy, a rescue dog.

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