

# Merkes, Nichols explain reasons for bid to serve as Menasha's next mayor

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## FULL TEXT

MENASHA - Incumbent Donald Merkes and challenger Rebecca Nichols will face off in the April 7 mayoral election for the right to lead the city for the next four years.

Merkes is seeking his fourth consecutive term in office. He defeated incumbent Joe Laux in 2008, ran unopposed in 2012 and edged challenger Chris Klein in 2016.

Nichols is making her first run for mayor. She has served as an alderwoman since 2013, when she unseated Klein. She defeated Klein again in 2015, held off Kathy Stahl in 2017 and ran unopposed in 2019.

As part of The Post-Crescent's election coverage, Merkes and Nichols were asked to complete a questionnaire to explain why they're running for office, what makes them the better candidate and how they would address the most important issues facing the city.

The League of Women Voters of Winnebago County will hold a forum for Merkes and Nichols at 7 p.m. Tuesday at the Menasha Public Library, 440 First St. Between 6 and 7 p.m., the forum will feature aldermanic candidates James Taylor and Joe Sherry in District 2 and Mark Langdon and Lindsey Klumpp in District 4.

Name: Donald Merkes

Address: 163A Main St.

Age: 49

Occupation: Mayor of Menasha

Highest education level: Bachelor's degree in architecture from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Relevant experience: Mayor for 12 years; alderman for three years; previously worked in the architecture and planning field; redeveloped historic downtown property; served on the Legislative Council Study Committee on the Investment and Use of the School Trust Funds, Wisconsin Urban Forestry Council, Doty Island Development Council, Fox Cities Greenways and Fox Cities Chamber of Commerce

Website: [www.donmerkes.com/](http://www.donmerkes.com/); [www.facebook.com/MayorMerkes/](https://www.facebook.com/MayorMerkes/)

Why are you running for office?

It's been an honor to serve as both mayor and alderman in the city of Menasha over the past 15 years. I've always believed that the best way to improve your community is to get involved. That's why I am both personally and financially invested in Menasha, serving on local boards, partnering in economic development by renovating a downtown storefront, and working as mayor. I'm running for another term because there is great opportunity for all of us in Menasha. I promise to continue the partnerships with residents, businesses and investors that are moving Menasha forward.

What makes you the better candidate in this race?

Menasha has grown by \$200 million in the last four years alone. A strong leader with a strong background in city operations is necessary to continue Menasha's growth. I am the only mayor to have closed a TIF district in Menasha. I worked to ensure Menasha was awarded an Opportunity Zone, one of only three in the Fox Cities. We are the second community to implement a lead lateral replacement program. I have been in the forefront in securing millions of dollars in grants for Menasha to enhance our parks, improve energy efficiency, build emergency response facilities and construct roads.

What are residents telling you are their most important issues, and how would you address them?

The most common questions I receive include those about roads, development, taxes and neighborhoods. I'm committed to ensuring all our neighborhoods are desirable places to live. By helping homeowners reinvest in their properties with matching grants through our newly created Strong Neighborhoods program, they will be. I'm also committed to ensuring that Menasha remains an affordable place to live. Keeping taxes stable while growing other revenues continues to be a priority. By continuing to facilitate substantial growth in all corners of the city and closing TIF districts, we will share the cost of services among more taxpayers.

Name: Rebecca Nichols

Address: 402 Elm St.

Age: 43

Occupation: Menasha alderwoman

Highest education level: Bachelor's degree in music education from UW-Oshkosh

Relevant experience: Alderwoman for seven years; chairwoman of the Administration Committee for six years; member of the Redevelopment Authority, Plan Commission, Neenah-Menasha Fire Rescue Joint Finance and Personnel Committee and Library Board; served on the Doty Island Development Council and Fox Valley Academy for the Arts; Leadership Wisconsin Program fellow

Website: [nicholsformayor.today/](http://nicholsformayor.today/); [www.facebook.com/BeckyforMenasha/](http://www.facebook.com/BeckyforMenasha/)

Why are you running for office?

I am running for mayor to build a Menasha that works for everyone. Menasha's challenges include our new reality of fixed borders, attracting and retaining qualified employees in a competitive market, and making essential investments in our infrastructure. Our response to these and other challenges will be more effective when we are proactive rather than reactive, transparent in our deliberations and actions, and when we collaborate with our residents, businesses, nonprofits and regional neighbors.

What makes you the better candidate in this race?

Menasha needs a fresh perspective in City Hall. Listening is essential, and it's important to listen to a lot of different voices. I've been fortunate to have many opportunities to hear from our diverse community, not only as an alderperson but also as a teacher, a parent with two kids in the Menasha Joint School District, at church, and as a leader of one of the oldest community groups in the state. As mayor, I will focus on growth that provides opportunities for residents and our business community. This is how we build a strong Menasha that works for everyone.

What are residents telling you are their most important issues, and how would you address them?

Residents want a mayor who listens to them. The No. 1 desire they have shared with me: more recycling pickups. This may seem like a small issue, but for many Menasha residents, it signifies the lack of responsiveness they experience when dealing with city government. I will address this in my first city budget. Residents want more effective communication about issues that directly impact them. As mayor, I will establish regular district-level meetings to inform residents and listen to them. I plan to engage Menasha's young people by launching a youth council. This is how we build a stronger Menasha.

Contact Duke Behnke at 920-993-7176 or [dbehnke@gannett.com](mailto:dbehnke@gannett.com). Follow him on Twitter at [@DukeBehnke](https://twitter.com/DukeBehnke).

CREDIT: Duke Behnke

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