

Interview Transcript - Shawn Klein

[Video link here](#)

Transcript is auto generated by [videotranscriber.ai](#) and cleaned by [claude.ai](#). Any errors are unintentional.

[00:03] Erika Malinoski: Hi everyone. My name is Erika Malinoski. I am one of the co-presidents of SOMA Action. Also with me asking questions today will be Allison Posner, our other co-president. SOMA Action is a grassroots organization dedicated to driving progressive change. As part of that, we put out a voter guide for every election, interviewing and sometimes evaluating candidates about their support for the issues our committees are working on. There are many important issues facing our county, but for this interview, the questions are restricted to only those areas where SOMA Action's committees have done at least as much work as we would be asking the candidates to do.

[00:35] Erika Malinoski: If you notice that important topics are missing—and they are—we encourage you to reach out to the candidates to ask about them, and also to join a committee and help expand our work. Today we're joined by Shawn Klein, a candidate for Essex County Board of Commissioners. Shawn, thank you for joining us.

Shawn Klein: Happy to be here.

Erika Malinoski: For our first question, could you please introduce yourself and tell us why you're running for the Board of County Commissioners?

Shawn Klein: Sure. Hello everyone. I'm Mayor Shawn Klein. I'm running to be a commissioner at-large for the County of Essex. I've been Livingston's mayor and councilman over the last 12 years, and I think I've helped to provide innovative,

[01:10] effective, and compassionate leadership. Our team in Livingston, I think, has provided a lot of good government. I think that if you're going to be a Democrat, which means you're the party of good government, you actually have to provide solutions to people. You have to address problems and provide solutions, and I think in recent times the Dems maybe haven't done that to the extent that they need to.

One of the problems in Livingston—I'll just tell you about one that we addressed—was that three or four years ago, there was a lot of crime in a lot of towns like ours at the height of COVID or just before that.

[01:44] And every time someone opened their newspaper, they would see on the front page that a house got broken into or a car got stolen, and people didn't feel safe in town. We knew we had to address this, and we did this by working with our police to get more police on the streets. We gave them new technology to help implement their work, and we were able to drive crime rates down by 75%. I think this was important for a couple of reasons. One is that it made people in

Livingston feel safe. In fact, we just had a survey in town that asked, "What's your favorite thing about Livingston?" and top three, by a wide margin, was that people felt safe to be here,

[02:28] which is great to hear. I felt like we were able to address a problem. In addition to that, a lot of the problems were extended because underage kids were being used by older people to commit these crimes, because they knew that there wouldn't be a big penalty to pay in terms of discipline. And obviously, I think you have to be careful with kids. You can't sit here and throw kids in jail and throw away the key—you're ruining lives there. But what we were able to do, by stopping a lot of these crimes, I think, was first of all, help a lot of these kids, because they didn't get into trouble when

[03:07] we were able to prevent them from getting into trouble in the first place. And I think it was kind of scary, because gun ownership was going up in Livingston because people didn't feel safe, and I was worried someone was going to get killed—like, one of these kids who maybe made a rash decision was going to get hurt. So I feel like we were able to help a lot of people in bringing down the crime, and that was something we're really proud of.

We've done some really innovative things in the environment, and I imagine that SOMA might be interested to hear some of that stuff.

[03:36] We were the first ones to do energy aggregation, which was something that I had heard about in a town in Westchester and I brought to our township. A lot of other towns also subsequently got involved with this, but we did this on our own at first. There was a time—and I think this was my most proud thing that I did in government—that for 14 months we had a contract where we were able to buy on the open market. We were able to specify 100% green energy, and it was cheaper than the utility rates. We made it so 70% of Livingston is running on sunshine and windmills, and I was so proud of that.

[04:10] I understand that people are tired of talking about the environment. It's not in vogue to address that issue across the country, but people may be done with the environment, but the environment's not done with us, and we have to make sure that we're addressing it on a constant basis. It's something we have to think about.

I'll just bring something to the county level for a second. I don't see a lot of initiatives on the county level addressing this issue. As someone who really thinks hard about green issues, and I have a lot more examples of things we've done in Livingston if you guys want to talk about that more,

[04:38] I really think that the county—there's a big budget there. I think there are a lot of green initiatives that are possible through the county. I want to see a county-wide community solar program. I want to see at least advocating for it at the state level. I know that there's some ideas around balcony solar. We have to institute that. If we can get that done at the state level, then we should be doing micro-loans to people throughout the county who want to try to afford balcony solar, and I want to try to set up programs like that. I have too much to talk about to just do like one question off the top,

[05:12] but listen, Livingston—I think people who are from Livingston, I'm really proud of our record there. It is a very diverse and welcoming place. As the mayor and as the councilman, we have gone to all the places, to all the different groups in Livingston. We celebrate—I went to an iftar dinner, we celebrate Black History Month. We do all the big Indian festivals, and of course Jewish holidays and big Christian holidays and Chinese New Year. We go to all this stuff because we want everyone in Livingston to understand that they're valued, that we appreciate their contribution, and that they are part of

[05:46] what makes us special. So that's how I've approached Livingston, and I'm certainly going to try to bring that same approach to Essex County as a whole. Let me stop there.

Erika Malinoski: Thank you. Well, the next question is just: could you tell us about what county commissioners specifically do, and what would your top three priorities be as a commissioner?

Shawn Klein: Okay. So, everyone, when they hear "county," they think of roads and parks. But the county—one of the really eye-opening things, if you go to like a Joe D's State of the County address, is how much more the county does.

[06:19] And this is really important. It's almost a billion-dollar budget. There is so much good that you can do with that money. So, the county has a school system. It's got three vocational schools. It's got a college. It has a justice system. It has a huge role in public safety. It also has a huge role in public health, and it's also a big part of the social safety net. So, one of the things that we really have to be careful about—and listen, I've made an effort. I have actually sat down with the mayors of the big cities, and I have said to them, "What is the county doing well by you, and

[06:50] what does the county need to be doing better with you?" And I've heard them out. One of the things that I did hear about was the county is in charge of distributing—I'm blanking on what they're called right now, the pressure of a name—eventually, food stamps, but SNAP benefits, excuse me. So, the county is in charge of that, but it really ends up being the cities that do a lot of work on the ground in distributing that. And because of what the Trump administration has done, they have changed a lot of the rules that allow people to get SNAP benefits, and people who need them are going to lose them, either because they're going to get cut out on purpose or because there's going to be confusion around them. It's going to be a big problem, and the county is going to have to work very closely with

[07:38] the cities to make sure that people who need that service and who need those benefits retain them. So that's going to be really important. The bigger picture there is coordinating with the cities, and there are two parts to this. One is coordinating between the county and the cities, and then also helping the cities to coordinate with each other. We have to try to create efficiencies in government. And the reason that we do that is because if there's a certain budget and you can create more efficient government, then you have more dollars to do more things to help more people.

[08:06] And that's really how I see it. As I said, I think you can innovate in government. I think you can provide good government, and when you do that, you can really solve problems for people on the ground. That's a huge goal, and that gets into a second issue of affordability. Right? So, everyone you ask that question to, maybe the first thing they're going to say is affordability. It's a huge problem. It's a middle-class problem, right? Middle-class people can't afford health insurance. They can't afford to pay back their school loans.

[08:33] They can't find affordable housing. The county has got to have a role in whatever capacity is possible to address that issue, and if it comes down to helping towns to work together and how the county helps towns accomplish some of their goals, then that's what we're going to need to do. That's certainly going to be a focus for me.

A third thing—I think environmental stuff is something that's really, really important to me, and I just don't see that—I want to see the county doing more innovative things. It's really what it is. There's going to be a lot of turnover at the commissioner level this year, and I think that Joe D has done a lot of good things,

[09:14] but I think that he has not had an equal partner, in some respects, in terms of energy and in terms of new ideas coming out of the commissioner board. I've always been a problem-solver, and I want to roll my sleeves up and get started and figure out what's doable.

Erika Malinoski: Thank you. Currently, even residents who are very civically engaged don't know much about what county commissioners do, and don't hear from their commissioners very much. What would you do to make sure residents know what services you and the county are providing, and that you're accountable to your constituents?

Shawn Klein: So, this has been a recurring problem. Obviously, you are asking this for a reason.

[09:44] A lot of the first question we get is, "What is a commissioner?" Right? So that's a problem, and that's a problem of communication. Especially when we have internet access and social media, it should be very easy for people to understand what their commissioners are doing, where they're showing up, what towns they're meeting in. You have to be available. And in Livingston, as mayor, my cell phone's on the webpage,

[10:13] right? When they call up, they think they're going to be getting the clerk, or they think they're going to be getting town hall. It's me answering the phone. If I'm doing something else, if I'm with a patient or something as a physician, I'll say, "Listen, I'm going to call you back as soon as I catch up." And the first thing I get from people is, like, "I'm surprised how fast you answered me back." That's what good government is, right? You have to provide service to people. They have to have access to you. You have to communicate with them.

[10:37] You have to tell them what you're doing. And part of that's, you know, there's a lot of taxes that people are paying, and they have to understand what they're getting for their money. So, there are people who are going to be less upset about their tax bill if they see the benefits that they're getting—and if you really are, of course, actually providing benefits. You have to actually show people that you're doing a good job, that you're communicating about it. And you want to hear from them. This is what we've done—

[11:04] I'm someone who really believes that I've never had a good idea in my whole life. It's always—I've always heard good ideas from other people and tried to implement them, right? I mean, maybe I've had a couple of ideas. I don't want to poo-poo it too hard, but the general thrust is that if you talk to people and you listen and you understand what their issues are, if you talk to other governments, to other counties, if you talk to other states, and you ask them, "What are you doing? What's working for you?" you can then bring that back to where you are and do a better job for the people that you're serving.

Erika Malinoski: [11:38] There's been a lot of concern about machine politics in state and county government in New Jersey—specifically, conflicts of interest, corruption, and lawmakers who are accountable to party bosses instead of to their constituents. What is your assessment of how significant of a problem this is, and what would you like to see done about it?

Shawn Klein: So, I think as a problem, it's actually gotten a lot better. The Andy Kim effect has been a really important thing in New Jersey. The fact that you have so many people running for every spot that comes up for election,

[12:13] it is like an explosion of democracy. And on the one hand, that makes things a little harder for voters, because they have to really learn about different people—and thank you so much for facilitating that. But you really need to do their homework, right? They have to pay attention. They have to understand where the differences lie. Who has the acumen, who has the personality, what kind of leaders do you want? When you have a lot of people to sort through, it makes the work of the voter a little bit tougher, but the upside of it is,

[12:43] a million flowers are blooming, right? So, when people talk about this being distressed over what's perceived as machine politics, my answer is, "Guess what? Things are getting better." And they're getting better fast. You have a huge array of people who are running, and the Democratic Party—even in Livingston, I had an opportunity. People said to me, "You can run for town council at the same time as you're running for commissioner, and if you win both, then you choose where you want to serve."

[13:15] And I said, "Well, that's terrible. I'm not going to run for—I want to be a commissioner. I think that the work's really exciting to me. I think I can do a great job in that role. And if I run for town council—and I think I'd win; I have great name recognition. Livingston knows me—I don't want to turn around right after and say, 'Sorry, Livingston, I'm not going to be there. I'm doing

this other thing." That didn't leave a good taste in my mouth. I wouldn't do that to the township. And by me stepping down,

[13:43] we had all these other people who stepped up to run for my spot. We had a county committee meeting, and everyone got up who was seeking the spot that I was vacating. Oh my goodness, the only takeaway that I think everybody had was how many wonderful, talented people are looking to step up and serve in our community. And if I hadn't stepped down, I think that might not have happened.

So, I think that machine politics is a problem. When people have power for a long time, there's the old maxim about what power does to you.

[14:17] I think it's really important that we see an answer to that, and that's what's going on right now all across New Jersey. So for people who are worried about that, my answer is, like, sit back. Look what's happening.

Erika Malinoski: Nationally, we're seeing an uptick in attacks on voting rights and threats that Trump might attempt to interfere with or disrupt elections. What do you see as your role as a county commissioner to help ensure our elections run smoothly and without interference?

Shawn Klein: So, first of all, just being county commissioner is a platform, right?

[14:47] You really have a voice. The county runs the elections, right? So, Chris Durkin is the county clerk. I happen to think he does a great job. When you talk to him about these issues, he really feels like the county's in a good position to be protected, and to make sure that people are not interfered with in voting. I think in Essex County, I'm not as worried about that issue as I am in other parts of the country. I think that between our police, the people at the county level,

[15:24] the people at the municipal levels, they're going to just be on guard for all this stuff. And if it happens, we're going to beat it back. We have to, right? I mean, democracy—you know, we even see the Supreme Court standing up a little bit on this stuff. So, I think at every level, people are going to push back against it. The more panic Trump gets about doing worse, the more he's going to look for ways to try to affect how democracy works. But we have to push back against it. We have to use our voices. We have to make sure that if people feel like

[15:55] they're not having the opportunity to vote, that we figure out what's going on and make sure that they get out there. There's nothing else to talk about. It's just the most fundamental thing for the country. We have to protect our democracy.

Erika Malinoski: Thank you. I'm going to turn it over to Allison now to ask the next set of questions.

Allison Posner: Thank you. Okay. ICE has been kidnapping our residents, holding them in inhumane conditions in Delaney Hall, and leaving families unable to meet their basic needs due to loss of income and crushing legal fees. What will you advocate for the county to do to help support our immigrant residents, especially those impacted by kidnappings, detentions, and deportations?

[16:32] Shawn Klein: So, what's happening with ICE just feels so incredibly un-American to me on the most basic level. There is clearly an immigration crisis in the country, and the Trump administration has used this as an excuse to put secret police on the streets and brutalize our citizens. It is really—anyone who cares about democracy should really be troubled by this. For the people who are warehoused now, right, the Trump administration a few weeks ago came out saying that they were putting together a \$40 billion budget to build—literally they said the word "warehouses"—for people,

[17:20] which is bone-chilling to hear. We, as a county, have to first of all make sure that we have a budget for social safety net. We have to make sure we provide access to it to as wide a group of people as we can. We have to encourage residents to be mindful of those around them that are living in the shadows. And we have a voice and a platform to try to make sure that people are aware of these issues, and to do what they can to help support people who are in trouble. There has to be an immigration system that works, but doing what's happening in this country right now is disgusting on so many levels.

[17:58] It just is. And I think the county should not be making agreements to house people in this situation unless there's some facility where there are actually humane conditions. The county should be making sure that human rights are protected and the Constitution's being observed. That's fundamentally how I feel about it.

Allison Posner: How can the county and municipalities collaborate to promote environmental sustainability, protect green spaces, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and increase resilience to climate change?

[18:39] Shawn Klein: Near and dear to my heart, as I said before. I think there's a lot of opportunities at a lot of different levels of government. I'll mention one other thing that I was really proud of, and this is something I think maybe can be scaled up on the county level to some extent as well. You know, the energy aggregation—can the county run a program, right? Can maybe the county step up and say, "We're going to take as many towns as want to be involved, and use our bulk purchasing power to go on the free market and buy green energy." But another thing that we did in Livingston—

[19:14] this kind of goes to just sort of government in general, and I'm certainly—I imagine I'll have this situation to some extent at the county, if I can get in at the county. When you run for government, you may have a lot of things that you want to do and accomplish, but until you

actually get into the spot, it's hard to know exactly what's possible. I remember when I was first running for government, I was saying, "Well, why can't we increase the building codes so that we have greener buildings, have green roofs,

[19:45] have tighter windows, better R-values on the buildings? Like, why can't we just mandate that?" And so, you come in and you say you're going to do that, and then you find out, "Oh, wait, the state controls that." And not only does the state control that, the federal government controls that, because the state uses federal government guidelines for it. So here you are, one council person in one town of 565, and of one of 50 states, who wants to try to change the federal policy, essentially. Here's what we figured out. When all the affordable housing stuff started to happen,

[20:13] and all these units are coming into towns, I was upset that there's going to be so much building going on, and no one's paying attention to doing the best they can in terms of green building. This should be something that we should be able to try to figure out how to do. I sat down with my town attorney, and we figured out that the only opportunity that a township has—and maybe a county has also—to go above and beyond the normal building codes is when you have an agreement for an area in need of redevelopment.

[20:49] You can actually mandate better building codes there. And I've been talking to other towns about this and trying to teach them how we did this. We have an ordinance that was passed, and we don't want to be stupid about this. I talked to developers, and I said, "Listen, this is the goal. This is what we want to do. How far can we push this? I want to push this as far as I can without someone saying you're making it impossible to get anything done now." So I spoke to developers. We figured out how much solar we can require. We figured out how green the roofs can be. We figured out the buildings.

[21:18] We figured out that when you did appliances, for stoves and stuff, you would have electrical outlets there, so that when the time came—if you build a new building now and you don't pre-electric that building, they're going to be stuck on gas for the next 50 years to run their stoves. So we made sure that in any new construction now—if they want a PILOT or if they want an agreement for redevelopment—we make sure that everything's electric-compatible, so that we don't have to sit here and have a building that we're stuck with for a lifetime that's going to be having a horrible effect on

[21:54] the carbon footprint. So it's thinking about these things, thinking about solar-wide programs at the county level. I want to ramp this stuff up. I think there's so much opportunity. I think a lot of it's about planting trees, right? There should be a huge emphasis on planting trees. It cools down neighborhoods. It beautifies neighborhoods. It's an inexpensive way to make places better. So I think about this stuff all the time, and I really want to push the ball on that stuff.

Allison Posner: Thank you. What do you support doing to help ensure that cyclists and pedestrians can travel freely and safely throughout Essex County?

Shawn Klein: [22:33] So, really important, right? Because cyclists and pedestrians means they're not in cars, which means less pollution, less traffic. It's just win-win-win for everybody. They get exercise, so they're actually—it's better for them also. It's something we absolutely have to promote. You see what someone like Mamdani is doing—I just read this yesterday in Brooklyn, this huge pedestrian—they're going to take one of the most dangerous intersections, which is an entrance to a park, and it separates a landmark in Brooklyn, and they're just going to take away all of these roads that are crossing. They have this terrible history of accidents and deaths and so forth, and they're just going to make it

[23:15] for people. And I think the county should be looking for ways to do that also. In Livingston, we passed—we pre-dated the state by passing an ordinance to promote safety, making sure helmets were worn, making sure—this is for electrical stuff, right? Because, you know, even my own son—I have a junior and a freshman in high school, and the freshman in high school, all his friends are on these scooters and e-bikes, and it looks like someone's going to get killed. So we passed an ordinance that essentially was superseded by the state,

[23:52] but we did ours a couple of months beforehand, and we didn't know whether it would succeed at the state level. So we've had our eye on this ball for a long time, and I think where you can think about improving it at the county level, we need to do that.

Allison Posner: As health care costs skyrocket, what can the county do to help ensure that health care is accessible and affordable for all residents, particularly immigrants, the uninsured, and trans residents?

Shawn Klein: So this is a very difficult problem. First of all, I'm an eye surgeon, okay? And I take Medicaid in my offices.

[24:29] There's not a lot of eye surgeons that take Medicaid. People travel far and wide to get to our office to get good eye care, and we provide it for them. And we do that because we think that everyone deserves to have great eye care. That's just a value that we hold. And I think that I bring that value to the county level. I don't know yet exactly what role the county can play. I need to learn more about this because—the county, I'm sure, will deal with insurance related to public employees that work for the county, and that's very important, of course.

[25:06] And the county has a voice to be an advocate at the state level to push for things. But what you want to see—I don't know how possible this is, but I don't know why more towns are not working together to create bigger pools for insurance risk and help to drive down costs. It seems to me that if you can get multiple towns working together, you have a bigger mass of people, and you can hopefully get better rates from providers, hopefully get better rates on

insurance. There may be a municipal role in doing this kind of stuff that's orchestrated by the county, and we need to look into it.

[25:44] Yeah, those kinds of things are what we have to try to understand.

Allison Posner: Thank you. So we've come to our last question, and it is: is there anything else you'd like to talk about that we haven't covered so far?

Shawn Klein: I guess I would just say, I'm a mayor, I'm a physician, I'm a dad. To all three parts of my life, I try to bring the same kind of moral values. I think that my mom always said, "You do what you can." And I always took that as an imperative—that you must do what you're able to. When I'm a physician, I can help one person at a time.

[26:31] If I get into the county spot, I can help 900,000 people at a time. I've always been an intellectually curious person. I want to learn about this. I want to put my head down and work really hard. Livingston, I always say, is the place that people come back to, but I feel that way about Essex County. I've spent my time all around Essex County. I did all my training in Newark as an eye surgeon. I slept in University Hospital more times than I want to remember. And I just feel like this position, especially the at-large position, is something I'm really well suited for, and I just can't wait to

[27:09] roll up my sleeves and serve the other people of Essex.

Allison Posner: Wonderful. Thank you so much for joining us on behalf of everyone at SOMA Action.

Shawn Klein: Thank you so much, Allison and Erika. I appreciate the time.

Allison Posner: Thank you for joining us. We look forward to seeing you around.

Shawn Klein: Absolutely. Take care.