

Minutes: NYS Democratic Rural Conference
 March 15, 2026, 7:00 PM via Zoom

DRC Board Members present:

Bill Thickstun, Liz Moran, John Hurley, Mike Zagrobelny, Betsy Passer, Summer Downing, Max Della Pia, Ram Lalukota, Ron McDougall, Michael Plitt

DRC Members present:

Jane Dodds, Abbie Hodgson, Deb Sprat, Dennis Dvorchak, Will Rivera, Josef Schoell, Judith Hunter, Jess Marciano, Marianne Hart, Joan Davis

Call To Order:

Chair Bill Thickstun called the meeting to order at 7:05 pm and declared that a quorum of the DRC Board of Directors was present.

Treasurer’s Report:

DRC Treasurer John Hurley reviewed the status of DRC finances as of March 13, 2026. The report had been circulated in advance of the meeting.

Key Bank Operating Account				
Starting Balance February 1, 2026				\$17,939.62
Deposits				
Neon Payout	02/01 - 03-13		\$10,732.50	
Walk-in Deposit	02/01 - 03-13		\$2,143.55	\$12,876.05
Disbursements				
Neon - 2 months	1/12/2026		\$329.76	\$329.76
Balance at March 13, 2026				\$30,485.91
Key Bank PAC Account				
Starting Balance February 1, 2026				\$474.11
Deposits				\$0.00
Disbursements:				\$0.00
Balance at March 13, 2026				\$474.11

A motion to accept the Treasurer’s Report was offered by Max Della Pia, seconded by Betsy Passer; the motion carried unanimously.

Treasurer Hurley explained the Key Bank requirement for a resolution by the DRC Board to change the signatories on the two Key Bank accounts to reflect the election of Bill Thickstun as Chair.

Mike Zagrobelny offered a resolution to remove Judith Hunter and add William Thickstun as signatory on the Democratic Rural Conference Operating and Federal PAC accounts at Key Bank. The motion was seconded by Ram Lalukota; carried unanimously.

Chair's Report:

Chair Bill Thickstun reported on challenges facing Democratic commissioners on County Boards of Elections. Appointments of duly nominated Democratic BOE Commissioners are being blocked by republican-dominated legislatures in some DRC counties, consistent with the Project 2025 voter suppression workplan. Members are urged to talk with their BOE commissioners and deputies and document problems. Keep track of issues and challenges; DRC can elevate the issue with the election committee chairs in the Senate (Kristen Gonzalez) and Assembly (Latrice Walker).

Petitioning continues to be a struggle. The convention bill carried by Bill Magnarelli and Chris Ryan enabling counties the option to designate candidates at a convention rather than by petition has not advanced. It's much easier to collect signatures in urban areas; legislators with cities in their districts do not consider this a priority. Bill suggests that the DRC and allies regroup over the summer to strategize.

Chair Thickstun continues to confer with DRC equivalents from other states- we are not alone. NYDRC is advantaged by recognition as a caucus of State Committee.

Governor Hochul pocket vetoed the Judicial Redistricting legislation, big victory for rural counties.

Discussion of biofuels. Attempts to expand use of manure digesters to harvest methane (RNG- renewable natural gas). Complicated by Climate Leadership & Community Protection Act) CLCPLA – biofuels are classified along with fossil fuels. Need to open legislation, but there are concerns that opening will lead to backsliding.

Pending retirements: Donna Lupardo and Marianne Buttenschon

Need help with DRC Bulletin

Archiving at SUNY Albany continues

Michael Lausell has agreed to chair the Nominating Committee. The DRC's May election will fill four regional Vice Chairs and five Board members. Candidates need to submit statement of interest.

The Progressive Caucus is circulating a petition in support of the New York Health Act and has asked for DRC support. One option is to decline to take a formal Board position and circulate to members for their individual consideration. Among the comments:

- Health care reform needs a national solution- Medicare for all (who want it)
- For-profit health care/insurance industry is the root cause
- This issue provides an opportunity for community conversation as we petition
- Drawback of resolution with specific legislative language
- Circulating the resolution to members implies DRC endorsement
- Costs and tax impacts

Conference Updates

Reminder to register! 123 registered to date. Straw poll will be held if any opponent to Comptroller DiNapoli collects enough valid signatures (15,000) to qualify for primary. State committee staff have registered and will have a table for VAN support. Josh Reilly- Saturday lunch- keynote speaker (union choice); NY17 breakout will follow. Bill is inviting candidates and lining up moderators for breakout sessions. Lizzie Weiss – Hakeem Jeffries staff (congressional update at 3 pm- backup Paul Tonko). State legislature panel Friday at 2 pm, Carrie Woerner to moderate, recruiting underway.

Jane Dodds reported that hotel room rate will go up at the end of March. Confirmed sponsors for receptions, dessert, lunch, and after-party (NYS Young Dems).

Jane noted that the union hotel Syracuse Downtown Marriot is available April 23 and 24, 2027. Room rate is \$179 including parking (\$12 daily fee). Resolution to authorize Jane Dodds to continue to negotiate with Syracuse Downtown Marriott was offered by Ram Lalukota, seconded by Betsy Passer. The motion carried unanimously.

Comments from Karen Ash regarding the conference program book: Make sure County ads are placed, and solicit paid ads (unions, businesses, candidates, friends of DRC, etc.).

Old Business: none

New business:

Roger Saltman announced that the summer in-person meeting will be held Saturday July 25th, Lincklaen House in Cazenovia

Next meeting: Post conference, Saturday May 2, estimated start time 2:30 pm

Adjournment

Motion to adjourn at 8:10 pm offered by Summer Downing, seconded by Betsy Passer, carried.

Meeting minutes prepared by Liz Moran, DRC Secretary