

Erica Deuso's campaign to be Pa.'s first trans mayor isn't about that. It's 'about the neighbors.'

As she runs for mayor in Downingtown, Erica Deuso isn't talking about her gender identity, but she's still defending it when she faces hate. "I want to handle it with grace," she says.



Erica Deuso is likely to become Pennsylvania's first transgender mayor as she runs in Downingtown, a heavily Democratic community. Steven M. Falk / For The Inquirer

by Katie Bernard

Published Oct. 29, 2025, 5:00 a.m. ET

By most measures, Erica Deuso's campaign for mayor of [Downingtown](#) is unremarkable. She spends Saturday mornings greeting residents at the farmers market and her weekend days knocking on doors in the [Chester County](#) borough. Most of the time, she's talking about traffic and community events.

Nevertheless, the effort is groundbreaking.

If she is elected in the Democratic-leaning borough, Deuso would be the [first openly transgender person elected mayor in Pennsylvania](#). She would do so as President [Donald Trump](#)'s administration pursues policies that limit public life for transgender residents and as [Democrats](#)' vocal support for the community [waned in the aftermath of the 2024 election](#).



Democratic supporters pose with current Downingtown Mayor Phil Dague, center, Chester County Commissioner Josh Maxwell, center left, and mayoral candidate Erica Deuso, center right. Steven M. Falk / For The Inquirer

For most voters, though, those facts didn't even register.

Deuso, who works in management at a pharmaceutical company, has lived in Downingtown for 18 years.

She is a committeewoman in the local Democratic Party, and board member for Emerge Pennsylvania, which trains women and [LGBTQ+](#) people to run for office. Her platform centers on traffic control, domestic violence, community engagement, and sustainable development. The Downingtown mayor has relatively limited power, overseeing the police department and acting as a tiebreaking vote on borough council. Deuso has promised not to sign an agreement between Downingtown police and U.S. [Immigration](#) and Customs Enforcement and said she wants to work on enhancing mental health services for officers while expanding their reach in the community to address concerns over traffic violations and e-bikes.

As she knocked on doors on a Saturday morning in October, Deuso's gender identity rarely came up in her interactions with voters.

"I'm not running on being trans, that's not something I ever do or ever wanted to do. I wanted to make it about the neighbors," Deuso said. "It's the other side making it about who I am, my identity."



Going door-to-door looking for votes in Downingtown in October, Erica Deuso meets Nicole Flood at her door. Steven M. Falk / For The Inquirer

The historic nature of her campaign has likely driven attention and funds to the race. She has earned endorsements from several organizations that back LGBTQ+ and women candidates. And she's received donations from outside the state and outside Chester County, including a \$3,000 donation from Greater Than PAC, which supports progressive women.

But a scan of comments in community Facebook pages shows her identity has also driven more vitriol.

“There are people who refuse to use my correct name or pronouns, they’ve deadnamed me, all those sorts of things. But it’s been 16 years since I transitioned; I don’t really care,” Deuso said. But she’s mindful that LGBTQ+ youth are watching her. She engages in some of the posts, but not all of them.

“I want to handle it with grace.”

Those efforts are already influencing at least one local teen. Nicole Bastida-Moyer, a 39-year-old voter, told Deuso her candidacy had inspired her 14-year-old daughter to volunteer to help other students with their mental health. Both she and her daughter are pansexual.

“She deals with a lot of hate,” Bastida-Moyer said through tears about her daughter.

“Having Erica’s voice, it means a lot,” Bastida-Moyer said.



Nicole Bastida-Moyer gets a hug from Downingtown mayoral candidate Erica Deuso while campaigning in October. Steven M. Falk / For The Inquirer

Impact on voters

Deuso responds to comments on her Facebook page and other groups occasionally. She said she tends to do so only when she thinks a true conversation can come of it.

Door-knocking in her neighborhood, Deuso encountered just one voter who appeared to be hostile to her because of her gender identity. When Deuso approached one house, a woman came to the door and glanced at the candidate and her fliers through the screen door without opening it.

“I’m not voting for him,” the woman said. “For who?” Deuso asked as the woman turned and walked away.

Episodes like this are relatively rare, Deuso said

“People are generally much nicer in person than online,” said Jenn Fenn, who managed U.S. Rep. Chrissy Houlahan’s 2024 reelection campaign in a district that includes Downingtown. Deuso’s opponent, Republican Rich Bryant, says he doesn’t condone those who attack Deuso based on her identity.

But Deuso has shared several screenshots on social media that appear to show Bryant insulting transgender women and making misogynistic remarks about cisgender women. At a canvass launch at the local farmers market, the township’s current mayor, Democrat Phil Dague, referenced these posts while comparing Bryant to Trump.



Current Downingtown Mayor Phil Dague talks with supporters for Erica Deuso listening at right. Saturday October 18, 2025. Steven M. Falk / For The Inquirer

Bryant claimed 90% of these posts are AI-generated but refused to say which posts are real and which are fake.

“I don’t like mud-slinging misinformation,” Bryant said. “I try to stay focused on what’s good for Downingtown.”



Rich Bryant is running as a Republican for Downingtown mayor. Courtesy of Rich Bryant

He sought to present himself as better experienced than Deuso to be mayor, contending his career in cybersecurity has prepared him for the mayor’s primary duty of overseeing the local police department.

Alice Sullivan, an 80-year-old neighbor and donor to Deuso, had noticed some of the nastiness on social media and said she was voting for Deuso because, unlike her opponent, she wasn’t a “bigot.”

She lamented the online attacks against Deuso as disappointing — but unsurprising. The candidate’s gender identity shouldn’t matter, insisted Sullivan, who has lived in Downingtown for decades.

“Other people’s lives, genders, whatever is not my business,” she said.

Josh Maxwell, a Democratic county commissioner and former Downingtown mayor who had joined Deuso to knock doors, asked if Sullivan thought others would disagree in the historically Catholic community. But the people who cared, Sullivan argued, are “not going to vote Democrat anyway.”

“There might be some,” she said. “I don’t know very many.”



Campaigning in the west end of Downingtown Erica Deuso greets Alice Sullivan on Oct. 18. Steven M. Falk / For The Inquirer

As Deuso walked door to door, her conversations focused on local and community issues. She greeted every dog she saw and spoke to their owners about their safety concerns — drivers had been racing down quiet neighborhood streets — and their concerns about the community. Deuso is proposing a program to offer hotel rooms for one night to those facing domestic violence.

She also made it clear that she would be a resource, even on issues that went beyond the mayor’s official duties. She showed one voter how she had started a youth-driven art project at a recent township festival. And pointed to a home that, just weeks prior, she’d brought a misdelivered package to on behalf of a voter.

For weeks, Raul Hurtado, Deuso's neighbor who immigrated from Colombia in the 1990s, has been rolling down his windows when he sees Deuso, telling her he's voting for her.

"She is from this town, my neighbor, and we need someone to help us," Hurtado told The Inquirer.

If she's elected, Deuso told Hurtado, her goal is to be available to all residents through office hours at Borough Hall.

"We can have a face-to-face discussion," she said. "Not through your car window."