

Vero Beach City Council Candidate Questionnaire

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QUESTION:

The Property Tax Amendment and Water Infrastructure.

HJR 1F on the November 3 ballot would raise the non-school homestead exemption to \$150,000 in 2027 and \$250,000 in 2028, cutting the City's annual revenue.

- Do you support this amendment?

- If it passes, how do you expect the revenue reduction to affect the City's support for water utilities, Lagoon monitoring, and water quality projects? If you intend to protect those programs, tell us specifically where the money comes from instead (which services or staff positions you would reduce, or what revenue you would raise).

CANDIDATE'S ANSWER:

I do not support the amendment as written. I am not in favor of giving the State Government control over our local millage rates and limiting the ability of local governments to make decisions based on their own financial needs.

I am strongly in favor of increasing the homestead exemption to \$150,000. The \$250,000 exemption may be too much, too soon. Our last significant increase in the homestead exemption was in 1992, when it was raised to \$50,000. Home values have easily doubled since then, so an update is long overdue.

If Amendment 3 passes, I do not believe the impact will be as severe as some people are predicting. By reducing the cost of homeownership, it would stimulate the housing market and create a sellers' market. When properties are bought and sold, they are reassessed, increasing the taxable value. While that may take some time, I believe the tax base will eventually recover and offset some of the initial revenue reduction.

I do not anticipate cuts that would negatively affect our water-quality efforts. When I was previously on the City Council, we eliminated 32 positions without firing anyone. At the same time, we were able to move forward with important initiatives, including the Step System, Baffle Boxes, and a fertilizer ordinance.

I believe we can take a similar approach this time without being as drastic. With responsible budgeting and careful management of City staffing, I believe we can maintain our commitment to water quality while continuing to provide the essential services our residents expect.

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QUESTION:

Sustaining Restoration Under Funding Pressure.

Much of our local restoration relies on layered, non-guaranteed outside funding: EPA National Estuary Program dollars, competitive NOAA grants, the state Indian River Lagoon Protection Program, and water management district contributions.

- If state and federal funding are severely cut, how will you keep research and restoration moving for the Indian River Lagoon?

- Would you support a dedicated, recurring City funding source to insulate these projects? If not, what is your alternative?

CANDIDATE'S ANSWER:

I believe it is our responsibility to continue the restoration and protection of the Indian River Lagoon, regardless of changes in state or federal funding. Given the 2030 mandate for the removal of septic systems, completing that work must remain a priority.

While septic-to-sewer conversion is important, we should not lose sight of other restoration efforts that can make a meaningful difference. We should continue pursuing projects such as oyster mats and oxygen-injection systems designed to address muck and improve water quality.

For funding projects, I believe it is our responsibility to continue the restoration and protection of the Indian River Lagoon, regardless of changes in state or federal funding. Given the 2030 mandate for the removal of septic systems, completing that work must remain a priority.

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QUESTION:**Understanding Our Lagoon.**

The St. Johns River Water Management District's 2025 monitoring showed a significant rebound in Lagoon seagrass coverage after years of decline.

- In your own words, what are the current water quality issues facing the Indian River Lagoon?
- Do you read the seagrass recovery as a reason to sustain current spending and effort, or to ease off?
- Beyond funding, name one or two concrete City-level measures you would champion to restore and maintain Lagoon health.

CANDIDATE'S ANSWER:

My understanding of the water system in Indian River County came from conversations with David Gunter. Simply put, the geology of our area means that water does not move straight down into the ground; it moves horizontally through the underlying layers and eventually make its way toward the Lagoon.

If we want to ensure clean water in the Indian River Lagoon, we need to make sure the water entering the Lagoon from the west is clean as well. Water quality is not just a Lagoon issue—it is a watershed issue. My biggest concern is the former Pressley Farms site, where biosolids have been applied to the property. The potential for nutrients and other contaminants to move through the groundwater over time is something we need to take seriously and continue monitoring.

We also need to promote projects that increase dissolved oxygen and improve water quality throughout the watershed. That could include oxygenating canals, removing accumulated muck, and continuing to use the rake system to remove debris from the water.

As far as the seagrass issue, It is a little to early to declare victory, we still have conditions that promote algae blooms and water quality is not where it was 20 years ago. We need to continue.

Measures that I would like to Champion, The City is in an area between the inlets that does not receive a lot of flushing affects from tides, which means we need to artificially increase oxygen levels or introduce an outlet for water into the Ocean. The key is to reduce stagnate water and improve water quality to stop anaerobic activity from killing our Lagoon. Last I was on Council we started oxygenating a marina area, unfortunately it was stopped before we could study the impact. The other option is to open a outward only outlet to the Ocean to draw more water in from the inlets to end the effects of the tidal compression zone.

QUESTION:

Future Water Supply and Utility Expansion.

- What is your assessment of the City's long-term potable water supply, and how do existing and expected utility operations (wastewater and potable, City and County) affect the City's overall water resources?

- The City provides potable water to Indian River Shores and reuse water to John's Island for irrigation, while the County develops an Integrated Water Master Plan. What specific City actions are necessary to meet future demand and restore the Lagoon, including connecting legacy septic systems to central sewer?

CANDIDATE'S ANSWER:

Currently, the City uses a blended approach of lime softening water and reverse osmosis, which I believe provides a good balance in both water quality and supply. One indication of the quality of our water is the relatively low number of corrosive copper-pipe incidents we experience compared with other areas.

Given the City's relatively slow growth compared with other municipalities and the County, I believe Vero Beach's potable water supply is in a stable position to meet our future needs.

The action plans of the County and City differ, The County faces a more dynamic water-management challenge because of its continued growth and the much larger number of properties still relying on septic systems. The City of Vero Beach began addressing this issue in 2015 with the Step System, which was designed to connect properties to the central sewer system and reduce the amount of septic-system pollution entering the Lagoon.

The 2030 mandate will continue to guide our efforts to remove remaining septic systems and move toward a more comprehensive, closed-loop wastewater system. The City should continue working with the County and other municipalities to coordinate these efforts, make efficient use of available funding, and ensure that future water and wastewater infrastructure keeps pace with demand.

QUESTION:

City-County Collaboration.

- Where do you see tangible opportunities for the City and County to work together on water and land use?

CANDIDATE'S ANSWER:

I recently learned that, with the construction of the City's new wastewater facility, Vero Beach has incorporated additional capacity that the County may be able to utilize. This presents an opportunity for the City and County to work together in a way that I would not have anticipated given our past relationship. The 2030 mandate creates some problems, mainly capacity issues and finance issues in the County. Working with the City the County could avoid requiring impact from residences, which is something that politically would not be popular.

QUESTION:

Three Corners.

In mid-August, the City granted another 30-day extension for private-sector developers to negotiate a master agreement, including lease terms, for the Three Corners project.

- Would you facilitate the development of Three Corners? Explain why or why not.

- What would you propose to improve the project?

CANDIDATE'S ANSWER:

Yes, I believe Three Corners needs to be developed. If we do not move forward with a thoughtful and appropriate development plan, the property will continue to be a political target and a source of controversy for developers and the community.

However, I believe the current RFP process has significant flaws. First, it effectively became a single-bidder process, which does not provide the level of competition and transparency I believe the community deserves. I also have concerns about the disqualification of one of the bidders. From my perspective, the reasons given appeared more political than substantive.

The RFP also required bidders to demonstrate financial viability. If a bidder has demonstrated financial viability, I have to question why the process has required so many extensions and delays.

I believe the current process is broken and needs to be reevaluated. We should establish a fair, transparent, and competitive process that attracts qualified developers and protects the City's interests and the community's vision for Three Corners.

I believe the current process needs to go back to an RFP and be restructured into several smaller projects. Breaking the project into components would attract more qualified bidders, increase competition, and give the City greater flexibility in selecting the best proposals for each part of the property.

I also believe the current project does not fully reflect what the public has envisioned for Three Corners. When I was Mayor, we did the Indian River Boulevard and 17th street task force which was conducted a community visioning process led by Penny Chandler, which included IRNA, IR Land trust, developers, community leaders, and concerned citizens. The conclusion was that this property is too valuable to simply turn over to developers without a clear vision and strong direction from the community.

At that time, three priorities emerged:

Restaurant space on the waterfront. We had recently lost the Lobster Shanty, and there was strong interest in having a quality restaurant where residents could enjoy the riverfront.

Another River House. We envisioned a facility where local residents could hold events, gather with friends and family, and enjoy the waterfront.

A deep-water boat ramp and fishing pier. The pilings for the fishing pier are already in place; the remaining work would primarily involve installing the decking. At the time, Paul Drittenbass proposed both a plan and funding for a deep-water boat ramp.

I would like to see that vision revisited. A deep-water boat ramp would be a tremendous asset to the community and, as I understand it, would be the only deep-water ramp on the mainland. It would also be a fitting way to honor Paul Drittenbass and the work he did to advance the idea before his passing.

