

Vero Beach City Council Candidate Questionnaire

Candidate: John O'Connor

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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:

The city's water utility is an enterprise fund which is not supported by property taxes, so it would not be impacted by Amendment 3.

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 would like to see a serious evaluation of which restoration efforts have been successful.

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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:

Fertilizer runoff ends up in the lagoon, causing algae blooms that choke off the growth of seagrass. When that happens, the whole estuary declines. Some progress has been made in the recovery of the seagrass. We need to find out what methods have worked best and are cost-effective.

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:

If the city is to meet requirements for eliminating forever chemicals to provide healthy, drinkable water we need to start with a cleaner water supply. The city should continue to work with all of its utility customers inside and outside the city limits to move homeowners off septic systems and onto the city sewer system.

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:

Septic to sewer conversion is the biggest joint opportunity the City and County can work on together.

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:

I would consider development on the three corners; however, I have concerns about the impacts to local traffic on Indian River Boulevard and the 17th Street Bridge. I am also concerned about the age of the existing power plant facility and the possible environmental hazards that may need remediation. I hope the end result is something beautiful that Vero natives and our visitors will enjoy.