Deryl Loar

dloar@indianriver.gov

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, which county leadership estimates could cut the county budget by roughly $50 million once fully in place. Do you support this amendment? If it passes, how do you expect the revenue reduction to affect the county's support for water utilities, Lagoon monitoring, and water quality improvement projects? If you intend to protect those water programs, how specifically would you make up the shortfall, and which other services or staff positions would you reduce?

Answer:
To better understand Amendment 3, we must understand Florida's recent history of Homestead Exemptions. In 1992, the Save our Homes Act was created. It caps annual increases of homestead assessed value at 3% or the established CPI, whichever is lower. In 2008 the homestead exemption was increased to $50,000. One could argue that our current homestead exemption should be increased.

That being said, I do not support the proposed amendment. I believe this process could have been achieved legislatively, perhaps incrementally to provide municipalities and counties and solid implementation schedule. Indian River County would realize a $41m decrease by year two.

We, the County, are currently conducting fiscal exercises in every department to be well positioned for either outcome. If the amendment passes, the items mentioned do not appear to be a priority currently in the proposed ballot language. Obviously, many of the programs mentioned are funded partially by property tax revenue.

Questions Sponsored by:

IRNA INDIAN RIVER NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATION

Clean Water Coalition CWC of Indian River County, Inc.

PELICAN ISLAND AUDUBON SOCIETY INDIAN RIVER COUNTY

Sustaining Restoration Under Funding Pressure

Much of our local restoration relies on layered and 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 county funding source to insulate these projects from state or federal shortfalls?

Answer:
The restoration of the Indian River Lagoon is a long-term commitment. It did not decline overnight, and it will not recover overnight. The 22 miles of lagoon that we enjoy has many benefits, not the least which is an economic driver. Similar to what exist in the City of Vero Beach, we may have to consider a Non-Advalorem Storm Water Utility fee. This would be among the last potential revenue source that I would seek, it alone would not represent the dollars that we currently utilitize to fund these projects.

While we should aggressively pursue every available federal and state funding opportunity, I believe local government must also demonstrate its own commitment. Local funding not only supports important projects, but it often positions the County to compete successfully for matching grants and additional outside resources.

The County already has an active Lagoon Management Program that includes shoreline restoration, seagrass and oyster restoration, nutrient reduction projects, education, and partnerships with organizations such as the St. Johns River Water Management District, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, and Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute. Those collaborative efforts should continue because they maximize both our financial resources and our environmental results.

Understanding Our Local Waters

The St. Johns River Water Management District's 2025 monitoring showed a significant rebound in Lagoon seagrass coverage after years of decline. What is your understanding of the current water quality issues facing the Indian River Lagoon and Blue Cypress Lake, and do you read the recent seagrass recovery as a reason to sustain current spending and effort, or to ease off? Beyond funding, what concrete county-level measures would you champion to restore and maintain the health of both water bodies?

Answer:
The recent seagrass recovery is extremely encouraging. The St. Johns River Water Management District documented an increase from approximately 9,900 hectares of seagrass in 2023 to more than 17,000 hectares in 2025, an extraordinary improvement that demonstrates our restoration efforts are producing measurable results.

However, I do not see that success as a reason to ease our efforts. I see it as proof that science-based restoration is working.

We still face significant challenges, including excess nutrient loading, stormwater runoff, aging septic systems, wastewater management, and protecting water quality throughout the watershed, including Blue Cypress Lake.

At the county level, I support continuing septic-to-sewer conversions, expanding stormwater improvement projects, restoring shorelines and oyster habitat, removing derelict vessels, strengthening public education, and maintaining rigorous scientific monitoring. The County has made meaningful progress in these areas, and we should continue building on that momentum.

When we look back years from now, I want people to say we stayed committed because the science showed we were making a difference.

Future Water Supply and Utility Expansion

What is your assessment of Indian River County's long-term potable water supply, and how do our existing and expected future utility operations (both wastewater and potable) affect the county's overall water resources? What specific expansion of county utilities do you believe is necessary both to meet future demand and to restore our water resources, including the planned connection of legacy septic systems to central sewer?

Answer:
Providing a dependable long-term drinking water supply while protecting our natural resources is one of the County's most important responsibilities, as indicated in a recent survey.

As you may know, we are currently implementing our first ever, Integrated Master Plan for our utilities. This plan, coupled with our many years of institutional knowledge, will provide our county with a “road map” to sustain our future water supply and utility expansion.
We currently are allocated 16.4 million gallons of water a day through our Consumptive Use Permit from the Saint John’s Water Management District. Our daily use is considerably lower than we are permitted. By proactively managing our resources, I am very confident of the future of our county’s needs.

Additionally, our Utilities Department is an enterprise fun, therefore allowing us some flexibility.

Annexation and City–County Collaboration

The recent Sebastian Pines and Cresswind annexations approved roughly 1,512 homes on former agricultural land. Because Sebastian operates no water or wastewater utility of its own, both developments will rely entirely on the county's system under an interlocal agreement. How will you navigate situations where a city approves major density increases that the county is ultimately responsible for serving? Do you believe the current interlocal agreements give the county enough leverage, and if not, what specific changes would you pursue? Where else do you see tangible opportunities for the cities and county to work together?

Answer:
Four years ago, I was not familiar with the term Voluntary Annexation. Basically, if a municipality desires to expand, contiguously, it can.

Recently the City of Sebastian has demonstrated that desire. Whether it is to expand their tax base or perhaps their ideology of growth, it doesn’t matter. We, the county, are faced with providing the services.

As mentioned, IRC provides water and wastewater for the City of Sebastian and has for decades. That relationship has proven to be exceptional.
We currently have an updated interlocal agreement with the city and are able to make adjustments as needed.