

City of Naples Council Candidate Forum February 1, 2024

The following summary was created from a transcription of an audio recording of the City of Naples Mayoral Candidate Forum hosted by the League of Women Voters of Collier County and the Collier Forum Coalition in partnership with the Naples Daily News and WGCU Public Media.

Although the transcription is largely accurate, it may be incomplete or inaccurate in some cases due to inaudible passages or transcription errors. Neither the transcript nor this summary should be treated as an authoritative record.

The candidates are Berne Barton, Garey Cooper, Nicholas M. Del Rosso, William Kramer, Linda Penniman, and Tony Perez-Benitoa.

Opening Statements:

Berne Barton:

- Born and raised in Naples, FL, with a background in operations management and 30 years in the insurance industry.
- Emphasizes problem-solving skills, experience in risk mitigation, and people skills.

Garey Cooper:

- Originally from Philadelphia, moved to Naples and became a realtor for a lifestyle of leisure plus the opportunity to give back to the community.
- Running to contribute “some independent thought” to this [inaudible 01:35:35].

Nicholas M. Del Rosso:

- Moved to Naples in 2022 after living “all around the world.”
- Experienced in various fields, including tech, education, and environmental testing.
- Was involved at the city level “everywhere I went.” Was invited to give a special presentation “here” on codes that were being ignored and “passed protective ordinances for the city.”

William Kramer:

- Came to Naples 26 years ago to coach football at Naples High School.
- Has degrees in health, computer science, and counseling.
- Expresses a desire to serve the community further after coaching. Was asked to run for this office by Gary Price.

Linda Penniman:

- Moved to Naples in 2000.
- Became involved with the Moorings Property Owners Association, including serving as chairman and advocating for the Moorings before City Council.
- Served on the Planning Advisory Board.

Tony Perez-Benitoa:

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- Moved to Naples in 1988. Has a background as a trial attorney and mediator.
- Highlights involvement in various boards and nonprofit organizations.
- Was asked to run for this position and decision it was time to be more involved.
- Hopes his mediator skills will help in solving community problems.

Question 1: If elected, what will be your top two priorities for the city, and what specific actions will you propose to address these challenges?

Berne Barton:

- Address attrition in city staff, focusing on filling vacancies and restoring institutional knowledge.
- Bring decorum and common sense “back to this process.”

Garey Cooper:

- Prioritizes addressing wastewater treatment and water quality issues, as well as improving parking, particularly in the Fifth Avenue district.

Nicholas M. Del Rosso:

- Focuses on sharpening financial management and proactively preserving Naples' small-town charm, including enforcing codes to maintain the city's character.
- Reduce unnecessary litigation; be more productive in project management.

William Kramer:

- Pledges to prioritize health and safety, particularly by ensuring first responders are the best-paid, best-trained, and best-equipped in all of Florida.

Linda Penniman:

- Aims to protect the city's investment by addressing issues such as saltwater intrusion, implementing a resiliency plan, and completing water treatment pond projects.

Tony Perez-Benitoa :

- Advocates for more efficient and effective governance, specifically by improving the efficiency of council meetings.
- Wants to address the compensation packages for first responders to retain and attract talent.

Question 2: Please share your thoughts regarding redevelopment opportunities in the city, particularly in the following areas: NCH Heart Institute, the Naples Beach Hotel, and the Four Corners.

Garey Cooper:

- Supports the NCH Heart Institute due to the community demographic and traffic on Immokalee Road.
- Views the Naples Beach Hotel as a positive addition, potentially boosting tourism and benefiting local businesses.
- Emphasizes the need for productive development at the Four Corners.

Nicholas M. Del Rosso:

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- Differentiates between the significance of the NCH Heart Institute and other commercial developments.
- Urges proactive pursuit of the NCH Heart Institute as a crucial asset for community health.
- Regarding commercial development, “There is room for exceptions, but they have to be exceptional.”

William Kramer:

- Criticizes delays in approving the NCH Heart Institute, highlighting its importance for healthcare in the aging community.
- Criticizes council’s delay in addressing the porte cochere requested for the Naples Beach Hotel. Multiple-lane portico is common sense.

Linda Penniman:

- Supports the necessity of the NCH Heart Institute and the positive impact of the Naples Beach Hotel on tourism.
- Expresses reservations about potential competition at the Four Corners for local businesses, in view of the time and money they’ve given to the community.

Tony Perez-Benitoa :

- Favors the NCH Heart Institute but criticizes delays in approvals and parking garage height restrictions.
- Supports multi-lane porte cochere for Naples Beach Hotel.
- Calls for careful consideration of codes for the Four Corners development, assess impacts and intensity, suggests subsurface parking option.

Berne Barton:

- Expresses frustration with delays in approving the NCH Heart Institute and urges its swift implementation.
- Supports the Four Seasons project as a world-class resort and advocates for better treatment of the developer.
- Wants a more pedestrian-friendly downtown; would like a comprehensive plan for Four Corners.

Question 3: What measures should the city champion to address environmental loss and damage relating to king tides, sunny day flooding, storms, and rising sea levels?

Nicholas M. Del Rosso:

- Advocates for proactive measures to protect the environment, considering it part of the city's charm and infrastructure.
- Emphasizes the importance of prioritizing high-impact zones prone to flooding and implementing treatment of the city’s lakes.

William Kramer:

- Highlights the interconnectedness of water and the need for collaboration with the county.
- Stresses the importance of formalizing relationships and naming a city liaison with county officials to address environmental issues more effectively.

Linda Penniman:

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- Supports cooperation with the Corps of Engineers on resiliency plans, emphasizing the need to set aside funding to protect shorelines.
- Calls for the completion of stormwater mitigation projects and the use of pervious surfaces and swales to manage water runoff effectively.

Tony Perez-Benitoa :

- Acknowledges the perpetual challenge of addressing water-related issues in a coastal city.
- Suggests infrastructure improvements like manufactured treatment devices, upstream and downstream filtration devices, and permeable surfaces to mitigate environmental risks.
- Outfall pipe project needs to be reevaluated due to its increased cost.

Berne Barton:

- Highlights delays in implementing stormwater projects and calls for reevaluation and incorporation of lessons learned from recent storms and floods.
- Advocates for reassessment of the city-county relationship regarding infrastructure funding to address stress on amenities and infrastructure.

Garey Cooper:

- Stresses the importance of cleaning and filtering water, directing its flow, and elevating properties to mitigate flood risks.
- Advocates for innovative architectural approaches to incorporate more pervious surfaces and elevate structures to safeguard against storms.

Question 4: What is your plan to ensure, at a minimum, a current services budget or better, an enhanced level of city services for the benefit of city taxpayers? And how might your priorities affect property taxes?

William Kramer:

- Advocates for the best-paid, equipped, and trained first responders in Florida.
- Suggests exploring revenue-generating opportunities like collaborating with the airport authority to increase the tax base without burdening taxpayers.
- Appoint people to the airport authority board who support that view, not those who want to relocate the airport.

Linda Penniman:

- Highlights the importance of proactive planning and setting aside funds for future needs, such as addressing saltwater intrusion with a reverse osmosis (RO) plant.
- Emphasizes the necessity of making timely decisions to protect property rights and efficiently allocate resources.

Tony Perez-Benitoa :

- Opposes recent property tax increase.
- Stresses the importance of retaining emergency services personnel through competitive compensation packages.
- Highlights potential revenue from renegotiating agreements with the airport to enhance city services without increasing property taxes.

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Berne Barton:

- Advocates for prioritizing the best-paid emergency services to attract and retain talent.
- Calls for a reassessment of the city-county relationship to ensure equitable contributions to city services from residents and visitors. A permanent city liaison with the county would provide an open, regular line of communication.

Garey Cooper:

- Proposes utilizing empty lots for development, particularly focusing on the 10th Street and design districts to enhance the city's offerings.
- Suggests exploring parking as a way to generate revenue and mitigate city's reliance on property taxes.

Nicholas M. Del Rosso:

- Stresses the importance of maintaining first-rate city services while considering alternatives to property tax increases.
- Advocates for more proactive management of projects like the outfall project to prevent project cost increases.
- Says the city's increasing property values "will take care of us if we take care of them."

Question 5: Which upgrades do you feel are highest priority for improving quality of life, and what specific actions will you take to support those parts of the Vision 2021 plan?

Linda Penniman:

- Advocates for implementing parking fees for non-residents to alleviate parking pressure.
- Emphasize the distinction between residents and visitors.

Tony Perez-Benitoa :

- Prioritizes safety as a fundamental aspect of quality of life, emphasizing the need for proactive measures to address potential security threats, particularly as Naples becomes a target for crime.
- Supports efforts to provide resources and support to the police department to enhance safety measures and deter criminal activity.

Berne Barton:

- Highlights the importance of maintaining Naples' unique charm through controlled growth and adherence to existing codes.
- Emphasizes the necessity of ensuring adequate services to support residents while managing growth effectively.

Garey Cooper:

- Stresses the need for managing development to maintain quality of life while accommodating growth.
- Advocates for expansion in nearby developmental areas to provide additional amenities and relieve pressure on existing infrastructure.

Nicholas M. Del Rosso:

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- Prioritizes proactive management of “what’s coming into the city” to protect its attractiveness and property values.
- Advocates for strict enforcement of existing codes and ordinances to preserve the city's unique character.

William Kramer:

- Advocates for enforcing existing rules and regulations to manage growth and redevelopment effectively and maintain the city's character.
- Supports using parking as a revenue source.

Question 6: Please share with us your community involvement to date and how this made a difference in our community.

Tony Perez-Benitoa :

- Highlights his extensive involvement in coaching various sports at Naples High School, emphasizing the impact of mentorship and community engagement with youth.

Berne Barton:

- Reflects on his ability to help clients and community members after Hurricane Ian, with his knowledge of the insurance business, and by organizing volunteers and collecting money and supplies

Garey Cooper:

- Says as realtors, he and his wife inform clients about opportunities, especially those new to the community.

Nicholas M. Del Rosso:

- Describes his proactive engagement with city government, including addressing issues related to property values, environmental protection, and safety through public advocacy and participation in council meetings.

William Kramer:

- Shares his family's commitment to community service, including hosting events and providing support to various programs and initiatives benefiting residents of Naples, including Habitat for Humanity, a mentoring program, and partnering with a special needs program.

Linda Penniman:

- Highlights her civic engagement, including serving on the Moorings Property Owners Association, the Planning Advisory Board, and the Coastal Advisory Committee, emphasizing her dedication to improving the quality of life in Naples through civic involvement.

Question 7: With people moving here to work in emergency services, schools, etc., there is a growing need for workforce housing initiatives. What is your position on workforce housing?

Berne Barton:

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- Advocates for establishing a permanent liaison between the city and the county to address affordable housing.
- Suggests exploring affordable housing options in conjunction with the county due to limited space and expensive property within city limits.

Garey Cooper:

- Recognizes the need for workforce housing closer to the city but most development will be in the county.
- Workforce housing must be part of planning from the beginning. Highlights the importance of developer incentives.

Nicholas M. Del Rosso:

- Speaks from personal experience as a renter, highlighting the financial strain of living in Naples.
- Stresses the crucial role of workforce housing in sustaining the city's prosperity and advocates for collaboration with the county to address affordable housing needs.

William Kramer:

- Acknowledges the widespread recognition of workforce housing as a top priority in the community.
- Emphasizes the benefits of having local employees invested in the city's success and calls for proactive collaboration with the county to prioritize affordable housing in new developments.

Linda Penniman:

- Highlights existing city-owned properties and suggests collaboration with the school district to address affordable housing needs.
- Supports the formation of coalitions and committees to tackle the issue of affordable housing and recommends revisiting previous studies for potential solutions.

Tony Perez-Benitoa :

- Says there is not much available land in the city for affordable housing..
- Advocates for demanding a portion of county funding for affordable housing initiatives and calls for aggressive collaboration with the county and school district to address the issue effectively.

Question 8: Define "overdevelopment" and propose measures to protect the city from it.

Tony Perez-Benitoa :

- Challenges the term "overdevelopment," saying variances and re-zones have not been granted as often as people think.
- Argues that redevelopment within code is not overdevelopment. People are entitled to their individual property rights.
- However, there must be a compelling reason for commercial variances.

Berne Barton:

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- Differentiates between overdevelopment and redevelopment. Says the reduction in city residents is evidence of successful redevelopment because it means lower density.
- Criticizes overdevelopment at the city's border with the county and calls for improved planning and dialogue between the city and county to manage growth effectively.

Garey Cooper:

- Discusses opportunities for redevelopment to enhance the city's appearance and functionality while respecting code regulations.
- Advocates for utilizing underutilized areas of the county from the Four Corners area going north.
- Emphasizes the importance of collaboration with the county to address issues such as parking.

Nicholas M. Del Rosso:

- Defines overdevelopment as any development that contradicts the city's vision and disregards the will of the voters.
- Emphasizes the importance of adhering to codes and regulations, calling for proactive enforcement and a first-rate council to oversee code enforcement effectively.

William Kramer:

- Views "overdevelopment" as a politicized term and stresses the importance of following existing rules and regulations.
- There should be a compelling reason to grant a variance.
- Variances granted should not be seen as setting precedent.

Linda Penniman:

- Calls for a collaborative approach involving the city, county, and FDOT to address issues related to overdevelopment.
- Highlights concerns about infrastructure capacity, particularly regarding roads.

Question 9: For clarification: is the city now fully staffed?

Linda Penniman:

- Expresses confidence in the city manager's ability to hire talented staff but admits unfamiliarity with specific staffing numbers.
- Emphasizes the importance of recognizing employees' talents and contributions to the city.

Tony Perez-Benitoa :

- The issue isn't whether we are currently fully staffed. His concern is about retention.

Berne Barton:

- Admits uncertainty about current staffing levels but highlights the loss of institutional knowledge due to turnover.

Garey Cooper:

- Acknowledges uncertainty about the current staffing level.
- Suggests that staffing needs are elastic and may change with growth.

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Nicholas M. Del Rosso:

- Recognizes the city manager's role in staffing decisions and praises his effectiveness in managing the city.

William Kramer:

- Presents specific data on staffing levels in the fire department and dispatchers, highlighting potential understaffing issues.

Closing Statements:

Garey Cooper:

- Expresses commitment to managed growth, water quality, and improving residents' lifestyles through common-sense civic-minded decision-making.

Nicholas M. Del Rosso:

- Affirms his dedication to serving the community's interests and emphasizes his independence from special interests or donors.

William Kramer:

- Expresses gratitude for the opportunity to serve Naples, emphasizes the importance of empowering city management, and highlights the city's greatest asset: its people.

Linda Penniman:

- Reflects on her previous experience on the city council, expressing appreciation for the opportunity to serve the people of the city of Naples.

Tony Perez-Benitoa :

- Says some candidates have different views from others, and change is needed.

Berne Barton:

- Shares his personal connection to Naples and his desire to give back to the community, emphasizing the need to preserve Naples' charm while adapting to the future.