

City of Naples Mayoral 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 incumbent council member Ted Blankenship, incumbent mayor Teresa Heitmann, and former council member Gary Price.

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?

Ted Blankenship:

- Priorities:
 - Smart management of redevelopment.
 - Addressing environmental and stormwater issues.
- Specific Actions:
 - Review building codes and comprehensive plan.
 - Prioritize and fund stormwater infrastructure projects.

Teresa Heitmann:

- Priorities:
 - Protecting the community from overdevelopment.
 - Ensuring safety, quality of life, and fair treatment for city employees.
- Specific Actions:
 - Focus on community input and quality of life protection.
 - Ensure proper pay and support for city employees.

Gary Price:

- Priorities:
 - Smart growth and redevelopment.
 - Addressing staff turnover and cultural issues within the city.
 - Specific Actions:
 - Focus on code compliance and sound decision-making in redevelopment.
 - Repair our staff and cultural issues before other priorities.
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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.

Teresa Heitmann:

- NCH Heart Institute: Supported height increase for modern equipment.
- Naples Beach Hotel: Addressing challenges due to project density.
- Four Corners: Opposes lane reduction and emphasizes traffic impact consideration.

Gary Price:

- Four Corners: Emphasizes careful consideration of traffic and density impact. Council's denial of an underground parking garage was a mistake.
- NCH Heart Institute: Highlights lengthy approval process, urges better project approval timelines.
- Naples Beach Hotel: Mentions preservation of green space as part of the project.

Ted Blankenship:

- Naples Beach Hotel: Inherited project. Negotiated improvements and conservation easement.
- NCH Heart Institute: Supported the hospital's goals but within city code and charter constraints.
- Four Corners: Ran out of time to respond.

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?

Gary Price:

- Prioritize implementing the stormwater project that was approved in 2019.
- Emphasized the need for measurable standards of accomplishment for environmental projects.

Ted Blankenship:

- The Beach Outfall Project did not address water quality improvement when first proposed. We asked that it be revisited for that reason.
- Highlighted progress of the current council in cleaning up stormwater lakes and its plans for further cleanup.

Teresa Heitmann:

- Emphasized her past efforts to address the outfalls and accelerate lake cleanup.
 - Highlighted the council's focus on environmental issues and resiliency under her leadership.
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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? How might your priorities affect property taxes?

Ted Blankenship:

- Experience with corporate budgets; aims to maintain adequate budget.
- Opposed recent tax increase, believes sufficient funds will be available with property valuation increases.

Teresa Heitmann:

- Emphasizes review and adherence to the comprehensive plan.
- Plans to establish neighborhood plans within the comp plan and ensure budget alignment with capital improvement projects.

Gary Price:

- Highlights the importance of considering pension and other benefits in addition to salary increases for employee retention.
- Budget considerations will be critical in addressing total compensation and retaining quality employees, which in turn affects city services.

Question 5: What specific actions will you take to support upgrades and the Vision 2021 plan?

Teresa Heitmann:

- Commits to preserving small-town charm and quality of life.
- Will protect community character by adhering to codes and minimizing variances.

Gary Price:

- The current culture is unhealthy, a culture of fear.
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- Emphasizes the importance of fixing internal culture to ensure quality of services.

Ted Blankenship:

- Expresses concern over the threat of overdevelopment and its impact on quality of life.
 - Highlights the need for environmental and stormwater improvements, having an implementation plan, and investing in it.
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Question 6: During your time on city council, please share one initiative you championed that wasn't implemented to your satisfaction. If elected, how would you re-address this issue?

Gary Price:

- Initiative: Redoing the stormwater water infrastructure on 41.
- Not satisfied with implementation progress.
- Plans to prioritize infrastructure repair and replacement if re-elected.

Ted Blankenship:

- Initiative: Refinancing and fully funding the city's pension obligations.
- He was disappointed with council's decision not to pass his proposal to do so.
- Would revisit the issue if interest rates become favorable again.

Teresa Heitmann:

- Expresses satisfaction with current initiatives under her leadership.
- Highlights positive changes in staff culture and rebuilding a strong team.
- Running for another term to continue progress despite ongoing challenges.

Question 7: What do you plan to do about the over development of Naples and its deleterious effects on infrastructure in general and traffic and the environment specifically?

Teresa Heitmann:

- Prioritize budget allocation to address infrastructure needs.
- Work with county and state to protect home rule and negotiate interlocal agreements to preserve quality of life.
- Make sure there is an interlocal agreement that protects city residents.

Ted Blankenship:

- Improve city-county relations to tackle issues together effectively.
- Establish/maintain good working relationships with county commissioners and FDOT counterparts to address water quality, traffic, and comprehensive planning.
- Manage growth within the city and prepare for anticipated growth in collaboration with the county.

Gary Price:

- Concerned about standards for redevelopment post-hurricane and ensuring projects fit within city codes and standards.
- Acknowledges limitations imposed by state legislation and plans to monitor projects to ensure compliance.
- Advocates for building city centers around large developments in the county to alleviate burden on downtown Naples.

Question 8: Setting aside the NCH project, what is your view of the charter height limit? Should it be repealed? If so, how would you do that? Or should it be enforced? And if so, what efforts would you take?

Teresa Heitmann:

- Supports protecting the charter height limit.
- Acknowledges the need to consider FEMA requirements for resiliency and safety.
- Opposes adding more categories of conditional uses to public service zoning to circumvent the height limit.

Gary Price:

- Fully supports the charter height amendment and opposes changing it.
- Does not advocate for adding conditional uses to public service zoning.

Ted Blankenship:

- Supports the 42-foot height limit in the charter and prioritizes protecting it.
- Resident input would be the only reason to reconsider the height limit.
- Opposes adding additional conditional uses to the public service district.

Question 9: How would fully funding the pension help employees versus helping taxpayers?

Ted Blankenship:

- Would provide a morale boost to employees by ensuring their benefits are properly respected and funded, making Naples more competitive in retaining qualified personnel.
- It can save taxpayers money by financing it at a lower rate today than in the future, resulting in lower tax dollars.
- Investing pension funds using a prudent investment policy can earn more than the required return, further saving taxpayers money.

Gary Price:

- Argues against fully funding pensions with taxpayer dollars, as pensions are already between 80% and 85% funded, a significant improvement from previous years.
- Suggests examining the Florida Retirement System (FRS) to ensure competitiveness with other state agencies in terms of pay and pension plans.
- Prefers allocating funds to areas other than fully funding pensions.

Teresa Heitmann:

- Believes fully funding unfunded pension liabilities may not be feasible.
 - Emphasizes the importance of continuing the current pension funding policy.
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Question 10: What is your position on relocating the airport and expanding it to meet the current demand for hangars?

Gary Price:

- Opposes relocating the airport. It would create environmental issues in another part of the county, cost a billion dollars, and take 10 to 15 years to accomplish.
- Advocates for working with the FAA to address issues related to airport noise and frequency of flights, as well as ensuring fair payment of gas taxes.
- Highlights the importance of finding balanced solutions to airport-related challenges with input from the community.

Teresa Heitmann:

- Opposes moving the airport. It serves a purpose.
- Moving it would create environmental challenges associated with potential cleanup.
- Emphasizes the need to address issues such as flight frequency and fair payment of gas taxes through collaboration with the FAA and hiring outside experts for advice.
- Advocates for a well-balanced airport that serves the needs of the community.

Ted Blankenship:

- Supports retaining the airport due to its value to residents and visitors and its contribution to property values in Naples.
- Respects the airport board's decision to investigate the feasibility of relocation but believes the City's efforts are better spent on lobbying the FAA for rule changes, such as higher and faster flight paths.
- Raises concerns about a proposed state law that could increase the weight limit for planes landing at the Naples airport and encourages community engagement to address this issue with local representatives.

Question 11: If government culture is truly broken, how do we fix our turnover - 215 employees leaving?

Teresa Heitmann:

- Attributes the turnover to individuals leaving of their own will rather than systemic culture issues.
- Expresses confidence in the city manager's ability to rebuild a strong team and fill vacant positions with the necessary expertise.

Ted Blankenship:

- Agrees that hiring Mr. Boodheshwar as city manager was a positive move and credits him with making significant progress.
- Highlights the implementation of a pay-for-performance culture and plan as a means to recognize and reward high-performing employees.
- Advocates for continuous improvement in compensation to retain the best employees and keep them in Collier County.

Gary Price:

- Criticizes the current leadership for the turnover and identifies a need for a different path and leadership.
- Emphasizes that leadership sets the tone for the organization and asserts that cultural change must start at the top.
- Pledges to prioritize rebuilding staff with a focus on cultural change, support, and ensuring the best-paid employees in the state of Florida.

Question 12: We're at a crisis point when it comes to workforce housing that hasn't been discussed tonight. What's the city's obligation or responsibility when it comes to workforce housing?

Ted Blankenship:

- Recognizes the limitations within the city in terms of available land at an affordable price.
- Advocates for partnering with the county to maximize resources and develop affordable housing projects just outside city limits.

Gary Price:

- Highlights the need for collaboration with the county and school board to address the affordable housing issue.
- Suggests exploring opportunities to participate in the school board's affordable housing programs.
- Stresses the importance of regional cooperation and ensuring housing for essential service workers.

Teresa Heitmann:

- Highlights efforts made during her leadership to encourage organizations like Naples Community Hospital and the Athens Group to plan ahead for housing their employees.
- Emphasizes the importance of preserving allocated funds for affordable housing and community redevelopment.
- Commits to maintaining and improving affordable housing options within the community.

CLOSING STATEMENTS:

Teresa Heitmann:

- Highlights actions under her leadership to ensure public safety and deliver a budget aligned with residents' priorities.
- Says this election is about redevelopment, overgrowth, traffic, and congestion.
- Says over 87% of Mr. Price's financial support has come from developers.

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- Says she will protect the town and fight for you.

Ted Blankenship:

- Doesn't want to return to the days of countless variances, deviations, and over-building.
- See where candidate money is coming from and where it's being spent.
- Says city has made progress in reining in overdevelopment in the last four years and he would like it to continue.
- Wants to use his corporate and organizational background to help the city address the needed infrastructure improvements that must be prioritized and funded.

Gary Price:

- Rebuts statements made about his campaign funding. Says he received 13% from construction and developers, 7% from real estate, 42% from retired; 259 individual contributions.
- Cites his votes against annexation of Pelican Bay and votes in favor of buying land for Baker Park and for preserving green space on Naples Beach Hotel property as examples of times he opposed development interests.