

Mayor Forum - 2.1.2024 League of Women Voters Naples City Council Candidate Forum

[Mayor forum begins 00:00:00]

Diane Preston Moore: Thank you; you can have a seat. My name is Diane Preston Moore, and I'm the president of the League of Women Voters of Collier County. The League of Women Voters is a nonpartisan organization, and that means that we don't support or oppose any candidate or political party. Our mission is to educate voters and to encourage informed and active participation in government. The League is proud to be a part of the Collier County Candidate Forum Coalition, which organized this forum and future forums to inform voters in the 2024 elections.

We want to recognize the members of the Coalition. And they are the League of Women Voters of Collier County, the Naples Area Board of Realtors, Greater Naples Leadership, the Greater Naples Chamber of Commerce, Naples Better Government, Collier Citizens Council, and the Collier Building Industry Association. So, on behalf of the League of Women Voters and all members of the Coalition, I'm delighted to welcome you to this forum, where we'll hear from the three candidates for mayor for the March 19th election. The forum for City Council will follow at 6:30.

A few notes before we begin. First, please turn off your cell phones if you haven't done so already. And we will be using a timer in order to ensure that we stay on schedule. So, we ask that you please refrain from commenting or clapping to keep us on schedule. Volunteers have index cards for questions. And those questions from the audience will be collected and used if time permits. This forum is being broadcast live on the Naples City television channel and on WGCU.org. It will later be rebroadcast on WGCUS's Gulf Coast Life. Candidates, I want to thank you for participating in this public forum. And to the audience, we appreciate your interest, your attention, and your attendance here tonight.

Now I'd like to introduce, to you, our moderators. We welcome Wendy Fullerton Powell, who is the executive editor of the Naples Daily News. And John Davis, who is the assistant news director, reporter, and Gulf Coast Life Arts Edition host for WGCU public media. And I'll turn the program over to them.

[00:02:39]

John Davis: Thanks, everybody, for being here tonight. And in the interest of staying on schedule, I'll just quickly go over the rules for tonight. All of the candidates are going to have one minute to give an introductory statement. And you'll be able to see your time on the screens up there. When you have 30 seconds left, there will be an audible tone that you'll hear so that it can help you know to maybe start wrapping things up. Also, we're going to have some questions. Wendy and I will go back and forth asking. Every candidate will have one minute to answer each of those questions. When we get through those questions, we will then be fielding questions that have been submitted by folks here in the audience tonight. And then at the conclusion of the forum, each candidate will have three minutes to give a closing statement. So, we'll go ahead and [audio cuts out 00:03:24-00:03:40]. What we'll--

Unknown Female: [inaudible 00:03:41-00:03:42:00]

[00:03:42]

John Davis: Oh my gosh. Right. Opening statements, sorry. Ted Blankenship. Please begin.

[00:03:49]

Ted Blankenship: Good evening, everyone. My name is Ted Blankenship. I grew up on a small farm in Alabama, and I went to Auburn University. After graduating from Auburn, I joined PricewaterhouseCoopers and was able to live and work in several different cities in the U.S. and in Europe. And then I eventually left and joined one of my clients, a public technology company and became their CFO. And then I was CFO of two other companies after that, including one that brought me here to Naples. And when my family and I moved here, we fell in love with Naples and decided we wanted to stay. I really appreciate the opportunity you gave me four years ago to serve on city council. It's been a wonderful experience. We've accomplished a lot even in the face of Covid and hurricane Ian. We made significant progress in addressing environmental issues and in reining in some of the overdevelopment that the city has experienced. But I think there's a lot more still to be done. And I believe my experience, my background in large corporations and other organizations can really benefit the city. Thank you.

Unknown Male: [inaudible 00:04:56-00:05:03]

[00:05:04]

Teresa Heitmann: Thank you, David. Thank you all for being here. Thank you to the League for of this enormous task, but a very important task, of bringing everyone together for this forum to educate on who will be the next mayor for the city of Naples. As your city mayor, I was elected four years ago to make change. And I kept my promises despite all of the adversities that we had: Covid, a new city manager, new attorney, and ending with Ian. Through all of that, the one thing you were concerned about the most was over development, and I'm committed to that. And I have promised that I will continue to do that, as your mayor. It is most important to me that you understand what this election is about. And it really is about development. It is not about who can lead, because I have been a proven leader throughout the adversities.

[00:06:07]

John Davis: And Mr. Price, your opening statement.

[00:06:09]

Gary Price: Thank you. Thanks for being here. Thanks to the Coalition for putting this together. My wife, Kim, and I have been here for 25 years. We raised our two children here in Naples. I started my business 20 years ago. And we continue to love this place so much. So, my commitment and our commitment as a family is to try to give back everywhere we can, in any manner that we can. So, I look forward to having a conversation tonight about showing the clear different path that we offer for our city's future. Thank you.

[00:06:42]

John Davis: All right, wonderful. [inaudible 00:06:45-00:06:47] And again, I will start with our Councilman Blankenship. The question is, if you're elected--

[00:06:51]

Unknown Female: Your microphone, please.

[00:06:53]

Unknown Male: If it's red, it's on.

[00:06:55]

John Davis: Right, and just leave it on. If you're elected, what will be your top two priorities for the city? And what specific actions will you propose to address these challenges?

[00:07:05]

Ted Blankenship: All that in a minute. The top two priorities for me are, one, to continue to manage, smartly, the redevelopment that's going on in the city. We don't have much land, if any, for new development. So, it's all about redevelopment and balancing the rights of the property owners with the rights of the neighbors and doing that in a consistent way that fits the vision for the small town charm that we have for Naples. So, that's very important. We need to review our building codes and comprehensive plan to make sure that that is still in effect and will do what we want it to.

The other big concern for me is really making a difference with our environmental issues and stormwater issues. We have huge needs to improve our stormwater infrastructure, to complete the removal of the outfall pipes off the beach, and improve the resiliency of the city. The projects that have been identified, so far, are probably running close to a billion dollars of potential need for the city. And it's going to be very important for us to rank those, prioritize those, and fund those.

[00:08:11]

John Davis: And Mayor Heitmann, same question. I'm happy to repeat it if you'd like.

[00:08:14]

Teresa Heitmann: I understand the question. I will continue to focus on listening to the community, protecting us from overdevelopment, making sure that we have a community that is safe, making sure that our employees are taken care of and that they are paid properly. We'll continue to hire the best for safety and honor them and protect them with the needs that they have to protect us. My husband and children have lived here for 31 years. We've seen the changes. The most important thing is our quality of life, and that's what I'll protect.

[00:08:58]

John Davis: And Gary Price.

[00:09:00]

Gary Price: Thank you. The top priority is smart growth. I think we all agree that none of us want over development. But what do we do about the next four years in the redevelopment that happens? We need to focus our priorities on following the code, making sure that our staff is well equipped to process things, that we make good decisions on behalf of the residents. That's clearly something that I think we're all concerned about. And managing that growth well is going to be the key to our success. The second thing that I want to focus on is fixing our staff and the culture that's happened over the past four years. We've lost 100 people each year on our staff for the last two years. That's 20% turnover. Before we can get to the big priorities that you all want us to focus on, we must repair our staff and make sure that

they're able to carry out the orders and execute the plans that we have for our city. Without fixing them, nothing else can happen.

[00:10:01]

Wendy Fullerton Powell: All right, we're coming to the next question, and we're going to start with you, Mayor Heitmann. 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.

[00:10:17]

Teresa Heitmann: Thank you for the question. The Naples Beach Hotel was a project that was approved when I was not in the administration. We have, now, things that are coming before us that are challenges because of the density of that project that we are working with the Naples Beach Hotel to address. With the Naples Community Hospital, we made a pathway for them to be able to acquire the height they needed in order to have the equipment for the modern technology and to provide exceptional service. Four Corners should be carefully looked at. Lane diets is not accepted by this community, and nor should we look at lane reduction for 41.

[00:11:03]

Wendy Fullerton Powell: Thank you. Mr. Price.

[00:11:05]

Gary Price: I'm going to start with the Four Corners, because it's the one that's ahead of us, not behind us. And I think making sure that whatever happens at Four Corners, we look at the traffic impact, the density impact for our community. And I think that's where we have to start. We have to look at that project very carefully. I think that the stoppage of underground parking, for the one particular project, was a big mistake on behalf of our city. Because that's a way to free up and not have concrete cover and an entire project. And so, I hope that we can revisit that.

The other two things - NCH, the project was first heard by the council in October of 2021. And nearly three years later, that project is still not approved. And so, we have to do better when it comes to approving projects of this magnitude for our community. So, I hope that this actually will get approved next week. That will be wonderful. And the Beach Hotel, part of the project that won't be talked about is a preservation of 103 acres of green space that we're very proud of.

[00:12:09]

Teresa Heitmann: Thank you. Councilman Blankenship.

[00:12:13]

Ted Blankenship: Thank you. First of all, on the beach hotel, we did inherit that project. It was already approved with so many variances and deviations, already approved that we were inheriting and needed to live with. Fortunately, however, we were able to work with the Athens Group and achieve some improvements. We got a conservation easement on most of the golf course, with 70 acres actually, specifically identified, that the community wanted. That's something we were able to do for the residents. For the hospital, I have supported the hospital's goals over the last three years to build the

Heart and Stroke Institute. But we needed to find a way to accomplish that within our code and within our charter. So, that's partly the reason why it took a bit longer than people wanted. But also, the hospital themselves wanting to get input from the neighbors and have it be the best it could be and fit in with the neighborhood and be something that the neighbors could be proud of. As far as the Four Corners goes-- sorry. I'm out of time.

[00:13:17]

Wendy Fullerton Powell: Thank you.

[00:13:19]

John Davis: Our third question pertains to the environment. 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, we'll begin with you.

[00:13:34]

Gary Price: The first thing we can do is get the stormwater project that was approved in 2019. That would have managed a lot of the water runoff to get that out of neighborhoods, especially along Gulf Shore Boulevard. That project, unfortunately, nothing has happened over that for four years. And now the \$30 million project is a \$90 million project. It also takes away from resources so that we can do other things like clean up the lakes, provide more resiliency for construction. So, that's going to have to be the first order of business is to make sure that we look at that and see if that's even a viable project from a water quantity and a water quality perspective.

The last thing I want to say about it in 19 seconds is a lot of these things that we're going to do have to be done with standards and measurable standards of accomplishment. We have to be able to measure the accomplishments. And so many times, we're not measuring how effective the money that we're spending is being used on these projects.

[00:14:39]

John Davis: Councilman Blankenship.

[00:14:42]

Ted Blankenship: Just a little refresher for some who seem to have forgotten about the Beach Outfall Project. It first came up back in 2005 when others up here were on council, and nothing was done. We inherited it in 2020. It was not approved. It was one of our first meetings, in April and May of 2020, that it came to us. And we realize that it didn't have any water quality improvement projects. All it was going to do is move dirty water further offshore. So, we had a meeting with our consultants and engineers and asked them to go back and revisit it so that we could clean up the water and actually improve the environment while we're making this significant investment. We do want it to move fast. I have a plan for getting it to move faster so that we can get those pipes off the beach and get the results that residents need.

We also have made significant improvement in cleaning up the stormwater lakes. You may know that only one lake was ever cleaned up in the city before we were in office. Now we have cleaned up three,

and three more are in process right now. So, we're making significant progress there and have a plan to get the rest of them cleaned up in the next four years as well.

[00:15:50]

John Davis: All right, and Mayor Heitmann.

[00:15:51]

Teresa Heitmann: Well, the record will show that I was the only one on council from my 2008 to 2015/2016 that insisted that we address the Outfalls. Unfortunately, that was told that we could not do it because it would be too costly despite DEP saying we had to remove those Outfalls for health reasons and for beach renourishment. So, it's immediately the first thing that we addressed. Unfortunately, there was an engineer that was on the job before we came in and had to hire a CMR to evaluate that. We accelerated the lakes cleanup, which was ignored, because our attorney couldn't decide who owned it. And through my leadership, we decided that the city owns those lakes. So, I'll have you know that the environment is my priority. And we, as a council, under my leadership, have focused on environmental issues and resiliency.

[00:16:50]

Wendy Fullerton Powell: Thank you. Next question. 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? And we'll start with you, Councilman.

[00:17:10]

Ted Blankenship: Budgets are a strength of mine. I have significant experience with large, complex, corporate budgets in good times and bad times and finding ways to make things work. We have a very adequate budget now. We were able to fund significant pay increases and benefit increases for all our employees, including our police and firefighters this year, within the property tax valuation increase that we had already. Unfortunately, others on Council passed a tax increase that I didn't agree with. That's gone to improve the reserves of the city, which are already beneficial. And I believe based on the property valuations that we're all seeing across the city, we're going to have sufficient money in the coming years to continue to fund appropriate payments and benefits for our city employees.

[00:18:00]

Wendy Fullerton Powell: Thank you. Mayor Heitmann.

[00:18:02]

Teresa Heitmann: I'll go back to the most important piece of equipment that we have, and that is the law. And that is our comprehensive plan. We'll immediately review what the Planning Advisory Board has worked on for the last several years. And we will look at their recommendations, review that comp plan, make sure that we establish those neighborhood plans within that comp plan, and make sure that the school and our local agreements are re-established in that plan. And we will not ignore our neighborhood plans. We will do that through our budget. And we will also make sure that we do that through our capital improvement projects in planning for the future.

[00:18:46]

Wendy Fullerton Powell: Thank you. Mr. Price.

[00:18:47]

Gary Price: I was hoping, from the previous two answers, I would better understand your question. But would you please restate the question? Because I heard it differently. I want to make sure I answer it.

[00:18:57]

Wendy Fullerton Powell: So, your plan to ensure, at a minimum, a current services budget, or better, that would enhance the level of city services that would benefit city taxpayers.

[00:19:06]

Gary Price: So let me just talk about the compensation for police, because I won't be able to get through all of it in a minute. But they've increased the salaries for police, but they didn't increase the total compensation, including pension and other benefits. If we don't look at the total compensation-- that contract will be coming up this year-- we're going to be falling short of our competition, which is other agencies between the type of pension that's offered and the amount of total compensation. It's critical that we look at not just raising salaries and hoping that we've got a solution but in order to retain people. At one time, we were down 20 police officers, and last summer, we were down 30% of our employees. We have to look at total compensation if we're going to keep and retain the best people for this city. And that obviously affects services. And it's going to be a budget item. Thank you.

[00:20:02]

Wendy Fullerton Powell: Thank you.

[00:20:04]

John Davis: All right. Our next question pertains to quality of life. And Mayor Heitmann, we'll start with you. What specific actions will you take to support upgrades and the Vision 2021 plan?

[00:20:16]

Teresa Heitmann: I think the Vision 2021 plan and 2024 plan has been consistent. The community still believes in the vision of protecting our small town, preserving our quality of life, and I've been committed to it and will continue to be committed to it. The quality of life is about not having congestion and traffic, and over development creates that. So, I will protect us by following our codes, making sure that we do not have variances unless they're necessary. And that will make sure we protect the character of our community and quality of life.

[00:20:57]

John Davis: Mr. Price.

[00:20:58]

Gary Price: Part of our quality of life revolves around the staff and the people delivering the services. And one of the things that I think we can improve on is making sure that we have the right people doing

the right jobs and that they're motivated to do it. The culture that they're working under now is not healthy, and it's a culture of fear. In order for us to have a better quality of life, they're the ones delivering the services. All the other things I agree with: beaches, comprehensive plans-- all those things we have to get right-- public safety. But I've said it earlier; I'm going to say it again, because it's the most important thing. If we don't fix the people, the rest of this, the rest of the quality of services aren't going to be there.

[00:21:47]

John Davis: And Councilman Blankenship.

[00:21:49]

Ted Blankenship: I have two main areas of concern that are areas that our quality of life is really jeopardized. One is the very real threat of over development. We're already being surrounded by over development in the county. It's right on our doorstep. You can see it going up just across Gordon River Bridge. The developers are extremely interested in this election, you might say. They've given almost \$200,000 already to a candidate in the mayoral race and a lot of money to council members. So, they are obviously taking a risk or making an investment, in their minds, on opportunities for outsized redevelopment in the city. And that really concerns me.

The other area of concern is environmental and resiliency and stormwater improvements where we have huge needs. We have had for many, many years. And we need to be investing and have a plan we can implement over the next few years. We can't wait any longer.

[00:22:56]

Wendy Fullerton Powell: The next question - during your time on city council, please share one initiative that you championed that wasn't implemented to your satisfaction. If elected, how would you re-address this issue? We're starting with Mr. Price, I believe. Right?

[00:23:15]

Gary Price: It's a good question. I think that the one initiative that we started that we didn't finish was the re-do of the stormwater on 41. We talked about it a lot. It's a major project. Somehow, it's been, I don't know, eight or ten years, and we still don't have that project done. And I think that that's critical in terms of infrastructure. That's something that has to be done. And I think generally, repairing and replacing infrastructure is a key point. Since I have 28 seconds, and I was mentioned about how much money-- I guess it's me, because I'm the only one that trades over \$200,000-- let me just share with you the facts. The facts are that 13% of my donations have come from developers, 7% has come from realtors. And I know you can shake your heads, but these are the facts. Go to my report. And 42% have come from retired people. So, when we talk about numbers and facts and calling it out, I'd like for you know the facts.

[00:24:19]

Wendy Fullerton Powell: Thank you. Councilman Blankenship.

[00:24:23]

Ted Blankenship: Yeah, I guess the main thing that I didn't accomplish, that I was really disappointed in, occurred over two years ago. I had a proposal to refinance and fully fund the city's pension obligations. We had an unfunded obligation to the three pension plans of over \$20 million, earning interest at 7%. That cost taxpayers 7%. This was before interest rates went up. We had an opportunity issue a bond at 1.5% and fully fund the three pension plans. It would have been incredible, such a benefit for our employees to have their pensions fully paid for and not a burden on future taxpayers. Unfortunately, it didn't pass council, then interest rates started going up. So, it's not as advantageous now. But I'd love to revisit it again, if and when interest rates come down. Thank you.

[00:25:19]

Wendy Fullerton Powell: Mayor Heitmann.

[00:25:21]

Teresa Heitmann: I'm not disappointed. I think under my leadership, we have a brand-new city manager who understands this community, who understands how to protect the priorities and the vision for this community. We have staffed the transition of members that have left, but we have rebuilt a team that is very strong. So, I'm very proud of our staff. They're very eager every day. We're a happy environment. And I'm very proud of what the culture has changed within the city. And despite Covid and Ian, there's still more work to do. And that's why I'm running again for another four years.

[00:26:09]

Wendy Fullerton Powell: Thank you.

[00:26:12]

John Davis: And we're actually a little ahead of schedule, but we're going to get to the audience questions now. And candidates will actually have two minutes to respond to each of these questions. So, if our friends from the League could bring those up to us, we can begin fielding those.

[00:26:27]

Unknown Female: I have them right here. Thank you.

[00:26:28]

John Davis: Oh, perfect. All right. And I'll start with the first question here. 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? We'll start with you, Mayor Heidemann.

[00:26:48]

Teresa Heitmann: I'll prioritize our budget to address those needs. I'll work with the county, as I've established a relationship with the county and with the state to work on protecting our home rule so that we can make decisions for our community and also make sure that we have an inner local agreement that protects the city residents. Remember, 88% of your taxes go to the county, and we operate efficiently on the rest. So, it'll be continuing to work with the county to preserve our quality of life.

[00:27:31]

John Davis: And Councilman Blankenship.

[00:27:34]

Ted Blankenship: Over the last few years, I've been fortunate enough to develop good working relationships with several of the county commissioners, including the current county commission chairman, who has endorsed me. And I think if we have improved relations between the city and the county, we can tackle a lot of these issues together much more effectively, whether it's water quality, the pollution that's coming into Naples Bay from areas out in the county, the traffic that we're experiencing in the city, or even the traffic outside the city when people from the city want to go to the airport or somewhere else. I've also been able to establish a good working relationship with our FDOT counterparts and looking at the projects that they are planning to do on 41, on Goodlett, on I-75, and the comprehensive planning that we need for the whole area. Because people love Naples, and they love Collier County, and they're coming here. And we just have to do a better job of being prepared for it and manage the growth within the city and try to work with the county on the aspects that they control so that we anticipate and know what they're doing and how it affects us so that we can be better prepared and better engaged.

[00:28:50]

John Davis: And Mr. Price. And again, I'm happy to restate any question at any point. It won't count against your time.

[00:28:54]

Gary Price: Just so I understand the clarification. Was the question about the county over development, the city's over development? Or both? Was it more general?

[00:29:02]

John Davis: It specifically says over development of Naples.

[00:29:05]

Gary Price: Of Naples. So, from the standpoint of the city, one of my concerns about over development is the redevelopment of parcels that have been damaged or destroyed in the storm. And what are the standards that we have in place? How can we improve those standards for what happens to the future in the redevelopment of these projects? Unfortunately, after Hurricane Ian, with the council's action to try to limit how much you can build on your house, eventually, after a couple of hearings, the state had to come in and pass Senate Bill 250, which restricted what the council was able to do with respect to property rights. I'm not a big fan of having the state or federal government tell us what to do. But that decision has been made now, and we're going to have to live with that until 2027. But we can absolutely watch over each of these projects and make sure that it fits within the code and the standards that we expect for our city.

The other thing is that with respect to the county, if you don't have a seat at the table, and you're not talking with the county partners and the school board and everything that's happening in the county, that's where I think we can add great value to the city, because we have to have relationships. And as

these projects are being developed, there should be more city centers built around the 10,000 homes that are being built on 951 so that we don't have to bear the burden of all of those people who are living in Collier County and coming downtown.

[00:30:40]

Wendy Fullerton Powell: All right, the next question. 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? And the second part is would you support adding more categories of conditional uses to the public service zoning (for example, hotels or mixed-use buildings) as a means of circumventing the height limit? Long question. I will repeat it for each of you if you'd like. Who are we starting with? Mayor?

[00:31:16]

Teresa Heitmann: Perfect. No, I will protect the charter height. However, because of the FEMA and the need for us to go higher to have resiliency and protect our homes and the health and safety of our community, I think it's something that needs to be looked at. And with our FEMA maps, it's a diverse level throughout the whole city. And I think we have to look at each neighborhood and each map. I absolutely believe that protecting us is important, and that will protect our character and our charm. Our city manager knows that Palm Beach was able to remain in a beautiful, quaint community without raising their heights. And that will be my goal. The second part of that? Because I still have time.

[00:32:05]

Wendy Fullerton Powell: You do. Would you support adding more categories of conditional uses to the public service zoning as a means of circumventing the height limit?

[00:32:12]

Teresa Heitmann: Absolutely not. It was a pathway for the hospital, because we wanted good health care. They gave a reason for it, proof that we needed it, and we gave them a pathway. It's not a pathway to circumvent the charter height. Thank you.

[00:32:31]

Wendy Fullerton Powell: Thank you. Mr. Price.

[00:32:33]

Gary Price: The charter amendment passed in 2000, and I think it was a great move by the people of Naples to limit how tall buildings are. It does not, unfortunately, cover residential property. So, the comment earlier about what happens in residential has nothing to do with residential houses. So, I fully support the charter height amendment and not changing it.

The second part is I don't think we should be changing conditional uses and adding conditional uses for the public service district. They're there for a reason. It's well thought out. And I don't think we should be adding any uses for that district.

[00:33:16]

Wendy Fullerton Powell: Thank you. Councilman Blankenship.

[00:33:19]

Ted Blankenship: Yes, I support the 42-foot height limit in the charter, and I have not heard from any residents that they want to change that. The only way I would think we would ever talk about it or consider it is if there was a groundswell of opinion from residents that they want to change it, and I have not heard that. I think we do have to protect it. Before we were in office, there was a quite frequent occurrence, allowing so-called architectural embellishments to go above 42 feet. And that was kind of up to the eye of the beholder. It could be five feet, seven feet, whatever. It seemed to change based on different people's opinions, and what was an embellishment seemed to change. And I think the council heard that most residents didn't like that. They felt like the 42-foot height limit was being violated. So, we stopped that. And we haven't approved any commercial projects with anything over 42 feet.

As far as conditional uses, I haven't heard any need for adding any other conditional uses to the public service district. That public service district was scoped out of the charter height limit in the 2000 election, because the public, the residents saw the need to keep special circumstances for certain uses, like the hospital, out of the height limit. Churches are also included, and government buildings are also included. Because there's a separate process for the public to weigh in on those and decide how big those buildings should be. And I haven't heard any reason from residents for adding anything else to those conditional use criteria.

[00:35:00]

Wendy Fullerton Powell: Thank you.

[00:35:03]

John Davis: And our next question from the audience. This is specifically for Mr. Blankenship. Of course, everyone's going to have an opportunity to answer, but we will start with you. How would fully funding the pension help employees versus helping taxpayers.

[00:35:20]

Ted Blankenship: Fully funding pensions is a big morale boost, I believe, to employees, because people have seen in other instances around the country, like in California, for instance, and some other states up north-- I don't want to call names-- where they've had curtailments, because the government's didn't set aside enough money to fund those pensions. And that harms the employees when they don't know if their pension is going to be funded. It makes us uncompetitive if they can go somewhere else where they know their benefits are being properly respected and properly funded somewhere else versus here. There's less concern here, because, of course, Naples is financially sound. We have a sound budget; we have a lot of reserves; we have a solid tax base. So, there's less concern about the ability to fund. So, it's more of a morale boost to employees that they know that their pensions have been funded.

The savings to taxpayers is if we can fund it at a lower rate today than we would have to in the future, that means we use lower tax dollars. So, if we can finance it using a bond at a very low interest rate, that saves money. If we can give the pension boards - which by the way, have a lot of highly qualified professionals on them who know how to manage investments very well - if we can give them the money to invest using the current investment policy, and they invest it on behalf of the city, and they earn more

than the 7% return, which they have done for the last 20 years, by the way, that saves taxpayers money. Because they're earning more on the money than the city has to put it in. So, to me, it just makes sense from a practical standpoint, from a taxpayer standpoint, from an employee morale standpoint, to fully fund the pensions.

[00:37:09]

John Davis: All right. And Mr. Price, same question.

[00:37:12]

Gary Price: It doesn't make any sense to fully fund the pension with taxpayer dollars. The pensions are currently between 80% and 85% funded. When I served on the pension board, I want to say that number was 60% to 65% funded. You have a problem when it's 60% to 65% funded. We don't have that problem anymore, because we funded additional dollars to get that number and that percentage up.

What I think we should do is look at FRS, through the state, because that's who we're competing with. If we're going to compete with other agencies, I think we should look at not fully funding our pensions, which are defined contribution plans. We should look at how are we competitive with other agencies with pay and with the right pension plan. So, that would be the first thing that I will look at. I don't think 100%, whether it's morale or anything else, I think it's better for us to keep the dollars and use them for other things besides fully funding the pension.

[00:38:17]

John Davis: Mayor Heitmann.

[00:38:18]

Teresa Heitmann: I don't think you can ever fully fund the unfunded liabilities for pensions. I think that we have contributed, as a city, to make sure that we are funding our share, which we lacked in many years. So, that's solid policy now - that we are contributing to those unfunded liabilities. And to continue to make sure that our investors have a return that is capable of funding our pensions and our pension liabilities. And if we would have actually gone with the recommendation of Councilman Blankenship, with the turndown in the economy, we might have ended up losing more than we would have protected in paying off any unfunded liabilities.

[00:39:08]

Wendy Fullerton Powell: Next question, we'll start with Mr. Price. What is your position on relocating the airport and expanding it to meet the current demand for hangars?

[00:39:17]

Gary Price: I'm in favor of doing everything we can to make sure the airport is a good neighbor, whether it's noise, higher faster. I don't think that it makes sense to move the airport. One, because I don't know what you do if you take 640 acres and try to put that somewhere else in Collier County. There's an environmental side to you're going to disrupt a bunch of land that is currently probably not developed, and you're going to develop that. I think that's a first environmental question.

The other concern is it's a billion dollars, and it's going to take 15 to 20 years to move it. I don't know who's going to pay for that. But that's a problem. And so, we need to make sure that the airport continues to be a good neighbor and that we continue to challenge the airport on making sure that they're following the rules, and they're being a partner with us on our community and how we're managing the growth of air traffic and the increased traffic that affects all of us, especially the people in Old Naples.

[00:40:23]

Wendy Fullerton Powell: Thank you. Mayor Heitmann.

[00:40:24]

Teresa Heitmann: I have never and would never consider moving the airport. It serves a purpose. And it did serve a purpose for us when it was a military base. It has an environmental issue that would be very difficult to clean up. What my goal is, is to make sure that we work with the FAA and work with them to make sure that they understand that the burden of flights that are every two to three minutes, sometimes during the season, is a relief for our community. I think that the utilization plan that was allowed to not be adhered to has created a problem with the amount of frequency. Also, the gas tax that is not being paid fairly, I think that we should relook at that also. So, I think that this is a problem that needs to be solved with the community and with serious solutions. That's why we hired an outside attorney that could give us advice on the tools that we could do to make sure that we had a well-balanced airport for our community.

[00:41:33]

Wendy Fullerton Powell: Thank you. Councilman Blankenship.

[00:41:36]

Ted Blankenship: I think the airport provides a very valuable service for our residents and visitors. I think it's a really good amenity that has contributed greatly to property values for all of us in Naples. I don't think it should be moved. However, I respect the airport board's decision to investigate it, because they've been asked that question so many times by residents, and they want to be able to answer it, once and for all, that they believe it's probably not feasible, not practical, maybe no land that's available to do it. But they want to go through that process to see. Maybe we'll all be surprised; I don't know. But I respect their decision to go through that.

I think our efforts are better off if we unite with one voice across the city and with the airport to lobby the FAA for the rule changes that the airport has studied and recommended be implemented, particularly higher faster, and getting RSW to agree to modify the flight paths so that planes can get higher faster when they leave Naples or when they're coming in. And it helps everybody. It reduces noise from all the neighborhoods, so we don't have to argue about which neighborhood gets the most noise. We'll just try to reduce it for everybody.

There is one concern that we just heard about last week that we should make all the residents aware of. There's a proposed new law in Tallahassee that would increase the weight limit for planes landing at the Naples airport - significantly - which means bigger jets, maybe more jets. So, I hope we're going to discuss that at our council meeting next week - what council can do about it. But I hope that you all will

help us with that in contacting Representative Rommel and Senator Passidomo in saying that we don't want that. We're happy with the airport the way it is. Thank you.

[00:43:34]

John Davis: Wendy, I'm out of audience questions. So, if you have another one.

[00:43:38]

Wendy Fullerton Powell: I think I do right here. All right. If government culture is truly broken, how do we fix our turnover - 215 employees leaving? We'll start with you, Mayor Heitmann.

[00:44:52]

Teresa Heitmann: Thank you for the question. We hired a great city manager, and the city manager is responsible for hiring and firing the staff. The reason that the staff left was not because there was any kind of flaws within or culture problems. People left on their own will. And I'm very happy to say that our city manager is building back a team that is strong and that will address the issues that come before him. The ones that are still with us have been overworked because of that. But they know the things that need to be done, and I am positive that Mr. Boodheshwar will make sure that those positions are filled - and filled with expertise that are needed to accomplish the job.

[00:44:47]

Wendy Fullerton Powell: Thank you. Councilman Blankenship.

[00:44:50]

Ted Blankenship: Thank you. I agree. Hiring Mr. Boodheshwar was a great move that we did; he has made a tremendous difference. One of the things you'll see on our agenda next week is that Mr. Boodheshwar is implementing a pay-for-performance culture and plan that we've been asking for, for the last three years. So, it's a way to really recognize and reward the highest-performing employees, which is fantastic. That's what we did a lot in the business world, and that keeps our best people happy, motivated and engaged so they'll want to stay with the city. And the other people, maybe it will incentivize them to perform better towards expectations. I think that's a big move.

Another thing that I'd like to point out, over the last three years, we've made a lot of progress in adjusting compensation. You may be aware that back in 2010, the council cut police compensation by 6% back during the downturn. At the time, council said that they were going to restore it when the economy approved, but they never did. We took a plan over the last three years to get there. So, now our police are back in the top quartile for total compensation, salary, and benefits. Now for me, that's not enough. I'd like to see us a bit higher. I'd like to see us the best in class in the region, because Naples deserves the best. And we want to keep and retain the best. And we want the best to live here in Collier County. We don't want them driving an hour each way to Cape Coral or Lehigh Acres or Hendry County or anywhere else. We'd like them to stay here in Collier County. So, I think we have plans we've discussed as part of the upcoming negotiations for the renewal of the union agreement with the the police. And I think we can still make significant improvements to the package that will benefit us all.

[00:46:48]

Wendy Fullerton Powell: Thank you. Mr. Price.

[00:46:50]

Gary Price: The reason I'm running for mayor is I think we need a different path and we need different leadership. The answers that were given to you about whether it's the city manager's responsibility or it's something of a change of incentives, ultimately, the leadership starts from the top, the tone is set from the top, it starts here, it starts at this desk. And we are the ones who establish what the culture looks like, how people are treated. And it can't start with the city manager. It has to start with us. That's a clear difference what I'm offering the residents of the city of Naples.

If you want to stay on the path we're on, I'm not your guy. If you want to stay on the path of losing 20% a year and having, by the way, the city manager's report to council, a culture problem and - I wrote it down - a lack of corporate vision. Those are a couple of things in his report to city council. Those are not my words; those are his words. He's reporting back a year ago. And I think if we're going to fix this, we have to change the leadership, and we have to start rebuilding our staff. And you've got to do that with a culture change and support. They're not going to care about incentives until they know that we care about them. And the incentives have to come. We should have the best paid employees in the state of Florida. And I'm not going to rest until that happens. So, we can talk all day about all these other things. But the culture comes from us, and our culture is broken. And I'd like to change that.

[00:48:29]

Wendy Fullerton Powell: Thank you. One final question. And Councilman Blankenship, you just brought that up about employees living and working in the city. 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? And we'll start with you.

[00:48:51]

Ted Blankenship: I've learned a lot about the affordable housing crisis through my involvement with the county's Affordable Housing Advisory Committee. Commissioner Hall took over that committee a year ago and has made significant strides. They've revamped who the committee reports to, who's on the committee, and how it's funded. So, the county is really moving forward with approving significant projects that include workforce components. I feel we should support that. There are certainly things we can do within the city, but it's really hard. We just don't have the land - not at an affordable price. I believe we can partner with the county and use our money to greater use, partnering with the county, just outside city limits, maybe two miles or three miles, where it's still close enough where people can work in the city. But we can get a lot more bang for our buck with more units than we can build here in the city. I know there are still some pockets of land we can develop here within Naples, but to have a meaningful impact on the issue, I believe we really need to partner with the county on it.

[00:50:00]

Wendy Fullerton Powell: Thank you. Mr. Price.

[00:50:02]

Gary Price: It's a great start. I think that one of the things I've learned and spent time on, in addition to the county, the school board is putting significant resources into affordable housing. They have big projects. And I've been talking with the school board members about if we could participate in their programs, because we're not going to solve the problem within the city limits, and we have to partner. But even beyond what the county is doing, one of the great opportunities is what the school board is planning. And I think we should be a part of that. So, that's where I think we get the added benefit - working together, looking at this from a regional perspective, and making sure that we have housing not only for our employees but for our essential service and for our workers of all of our critical businesses.

[00:50:52]

Wendy Fullerton Powell: Mayor Heitmann.

[00:50:55]

Teresa Heitmann: I will tell you, in my leadership, I've worked with the Naples Community Hospital and with the Athens Group, to be the Four Seasons, and encouraging them to think ahead and plan ahead for how they will house the employees they are going to need for their new development. So, I think that should have been done prior to any redevelopment, and I worked with the hospital making sure that they did try and purchase property within the city so that we had affordable housing. And I also make sure that I don't change or let any of the funds that are allocated towards affordable housing or any of our community redevelopment funds in the area that has been selected for any type of affordable housing to be changed, which is what happened in the past. And I'll make sure that what little we have will maintain and become better affordable housing for our community.

[00:52:01]

Wendy Fullerton Powell: Thank you.

[00:52:03]

John Davis: All right, and we'll now conclude things with our final statements from each of the candidates. You will have three minutes to give a closing statement. And we'll start with you, Mayor Heitmann.

[00:52:13]

Teresa Heitmann: I stood here four years ago, and you elected me for change. I promised you that change, and despite all of the adversities and natural disasters, we have worked together to stay strong and making sure we enforce the codes, that we protect the environment, that we protect ourselves from overdevelopment. The World News report says that we're the safest city in the country. What more do you want, besides being number one? We have created a culture of good people. And I love those employees. We just celebrated our 100 years. And I think that brought us back together from whatever cultural differences were in the past. We celebrated the past, we honored the past, we celebrated the present, and we are shaping the future. And I go to work; I'm there every day. And I will tell you, it's a fun environment. I don't have the anxiety or what I hear about fears, that it's a culture that is not up to the standards of this community. I invite you to come and visit me at City Hall.

We've delivered a budget aligned with the residents' priorities, and I'm very proud of that. We've supported our new police chief and our new fire chief with the tools and the funds they need to retain new employees and make sure that we continue to be a safe place. I'll just tell you that this election is about redevelopment. It's about the overgrowth, it's about the traffic, it's about the congestion. And we can put out smoke and mirrors. My leadership has accomplished a lot with our council, and I'm very proud of it. And we will continue to do so. But let me ask you this. Who benefits from short meetings and minimal public input? Developers. Who benefits from non-elected people making decisions for us behind closed doors? Developers. Who benefits from kicking the can down the road on environmental issues? The developers. Over 87% of Mr. Price's financial support has come from developers. The developers are afraid, and they're going to fight to take over our city. And I will fight to protect us and our quality of life. I love this town. We have lived here for 34 years, and I intend to protect it, and I'll fight for you. I'm asking for your support and your continued trust and a vote on March 19th.

[00:55:15]

John Davis: Thank you. And Councilman Blankenship, your closing statement.

[00:55:23]

Ted Blankenship: Thank you. Thank you all for attending tonight. Thanks for listening. Thanks for the questions you submitted. We really appreciate your engagement and participation, as always. I'd just like to ask you not to take us backwards. I don't want to see us go back to the days of countless variances, deviations, over building. Mr. Price said that only - I think he said - 14% of his contributions came from developers. Look at the list. The list is available on the city clerk's website. You can see where the money comes from. You can see all of our information. After the new state ethics law, you can see everything about us that you may want to know, for good or bad. But I always believe it's my background, my training in accounting, finance, consulting, follow the money. See where the money is coming from. See where the money is being spent. And it tells you a lot about what's going on and what people mean when they're talking or about their initiatives.

I think we have made a lot of progress in reining in over development the last four years and would like to see that continue. And I respect Mayor Heitmann's leadership on that. I really do. I think she and the council (my colleagues) have done a great job in that area the last four years. I think, though, something else is needed, going forward. We have tremendous needs, as a city, for infrastructure improvements. We have a basin assessment that shows we need \$500 million of stormwater projects throughout the city. We have a lakes management plan that shows we still have 14 lakes we need to clean up. We have an integrated water resource plan that shows we need to spend all this money developing our water wells that provide our drinking water. We need to spend money revamping our sewer infrastructure, our water infrastructure. We still have to get the beach outfall pipes off the beach. And I'm sure you saw in the newspaper, that is currently estimated at \$86 million dollars. But we're hoping that will come down. We still need to rebuild the pier. That hasn't happened yet. People are throwing around a \$20 million number for that.

So, huge needs. We've got to bring in this all together and prioritize them in one place for this city, decide what it is we really want to focus on, and what we want to accomplish the next five to ten years and how we're going to fund it. Those are huge needs, and that plays right into my background. That's why I'm willing to get involved and serve. And I hope you'll support me in that with my corporate

background and organizational background, managing complex projects and budgets and thousands of employees and billions of dollars of capital. I hope I can bring that to bear to help Naples through this next phase. I think we just have huge needs that we need to work through, and we need to accelerate them. A lot of these have been talked about years and years. And it's time to take action. Thank you.

[00:58:30]

John Davis: Thank you. And Gary Price, your closing statement.

[00:58:33]

Gary Price: Thank you. Thank you to the League of Women Voters and to the Coalition for putting this together. And thanks to all of you, and thanks to everyone watching at home. This journey that we've been on for the past 20 years has been really enjoyable for me and my family. And we have reaped the benefits of living in just a wonderful place. One of the priorities that I have is that I want this to be a place that our daughter will come back and raise her family here. And so, everything that I'm looking at and every decision I make, it's not only in your best interest to what I think the decisions are for today, but it's for our future. And so, selfishly, I think about her coming back and raising her family. That's the bar that I set.

I have a lot of things to say. But both of my opponents are entitled to their own opinions, but they're not entitled to their own facts. And so, please go on the website and look at the numbers of where we've raised money. I stated the numbers; I'll tell you again. It's 13% from construction and developers, 7% from real estate, and 42% from retired. There's obviously a lot more. 259 people have made a donation to our campaign. And part of that is we've developed great friendships over 20 years, and I've been representing the city for 20 years and making good decisions on behalf of our city. Let me tell you about a couple of things that wouldn't fit in the pro-development camp, because you probably don't know about them, and it's important that you do. So, those are the facts on where the money comes from.

I wish that my opponents had followed the money on projects for the city and your dollars as well as they've followed my money. But let me just say that the annexation of Pelican Bay in 2005 was a big vote. It was a month after I was elected. Actually, I was appointed. And we had to decide whether to annex Pelican Bay into the city of Naples. That would have been the worst thing that ever happened to this city. We didn't have the infrastructure to support it. We didn't have the ability to manage doubling the size of the city, whatever development might happen in Pelican Bay. And I was the swing vote. It was a four-three vote to deny that. That was in 2005.

In Baker Park, when we had to decide whether to buy the land, it was a vote on buying the land so that we could build the park. We walked into the meeting. There were two people in favor. I was able to convince two people to change their minds, and we bought the land for Baker Park. I think that's a significant legacy. And it wouldn't have happened if it wasn't for my leadership. That was slated to be condominiums or a hotel. If I were a pro-development candidate or guy, I would have voted for Pelican Bay annexation. I would have voted against buying the land to preserve it for green space, the same as what I did for the beach hotel. We preserved 103 acres of green space, and that's something that would have been 150 homes in the city of Naples, that we clearly couldn't sustain and manage.

[01:01:43]

John Davis: Thank you very much.

[01:01:46]

Diane Preston Moore: The League of Women Voters of Collier County believes that it's important for voters to be informed, and we've covered a lot of ground tonight. So, we thank the candidates for participating in this forum. We also thank the members of the Candidate Forum Coalition, who co-sponsored the event. And we thank the many, many volunteers who made this forum possible. A huge thank you also to Wendy Fullerton Powell and John Davis for taking the time to moderate the forum tonight. And finally, we thank you, the public, for watching and listening here tonight. Election day is Tuesday, March 19th. The final date to register to vote in this election is February 20th. If you're not yet registered to vote, a representative from the Supervisor of Elections Office is outside and can help you. And I believe that they're posting the phone number for the supervisor of elections on the screen. And they can help you by phone as well. So, please remember to vote. And we look forward to seeing you at the polls. The forum for City Council will begin right here at 6:30. So, good night for now.

[Mayor forum ends 01:03:04]

Next meeting begins at 01:29:36