



**Candidate Questionnaire – County Commissioner
August 2024 Primary Election**

Your name: **Rick LoCastro (Collier County Commissioner, District 1)**
Your email address: rick@ricklocastro.com or Rick.LoCastro@colliercountyfl.gov
Your phone number: **Office: (239) 252-8601**
Your age: **58**
Today's date: **June 14, 2024**

What year did you move to Collier County and where did you live previously?

I moved to Naples in the summer of 2012 when I was recruited by Physicians Regional Medical Center to be their Chief Operating Officer. Prior to that I was in the United States Air Force for 24 years (retiring as a full Colonel) living and working in over 80 countries and all over the United States, The Pentagon, NATO, etc... I grew up in St. Petersburg, FL... and had visited Naples, Marco Island, and the surrounding area many times.

Where did you go to high school, and if you received any post-secondary education, where did you go, what degree(s) did you receive, and when?

I attended 4 years of high school in St. Petersburg FL... attending Admiral Farragut Academy... a highly competitive private military school... whose claim to fame is being the only school in the world to have two graduates walk on the moon -- Alan Shepard and Charlie Duke. I graduated in 1984 #2 in my class.

Immediately following my high school graduation in 1984, I was nominated to every Military Service Academy... and selected the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs. I graduated from the Air Force Academy in 1988 (with a Bachelor of Science Degree) -- and went on to have a 24-year military Air Force career having served two Presidents, General Norman Schwarzkopf, commanded multiple military bases, and served in a host of high level and high-profile senior leadership Commander positions.

I earned Three Different Masters' Degrees (1998, 2000, 2005) -- most notably one from Central Michigan University in Public Policy & Public Administration.

I'm a graduate of the Enterprise Leadership Course, University of North Carolina, Kenan-Flagler Business School, Chapel Hill, NC (2008)

I'm also a graduate of the Disney Institute Business Excellence Course, Orlando, FL (2012)

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Please summarize your work experience, including employers and dates.

1988-2012

U.S. Air Force Officer -- retired as a full Colonel. Worked for two U.S. Presidents, General Norman Schwarzkopf, Aide to a 4-Star General for 3 Years, Senior positions in NATO & The Pentagon. Senior leader overseeing Air Force One operations and support. Commanded multiple military bases -- Eglin Air Force Base (FL) & returned to the U.S. Air Force Academy (CO) as the first graduate to be the Base Commander.

2012-2016 Recruited to Naples to be Chief Operating Officer of Physicians Regional Medical Center Collier Blvd in East Naples.

2016-2017 Avow Hospice, Senior Director of Development & Senior Veteran Advisor

2017-2019 President, RJL Consulting Team, Naples FL. President and Founder of a dynamic and diverse consulting company. Delivered strategic and operational expertise and success to maximize revenue, recruitment, efficiency, and performance. Specialized in local, state, national, and international clients. Healthcare, Veterans Programs, Retail Businesses, Physicians Practices, Construction, Security, Energy/Environmental, Government/Military... all to accelerate team and business performance.

Aug 2019 Encouraged by many local citizens to consider running for Collier County Commissioner, District 1. Spoke with citizens, mentors, and friends. Filed in Sept 2019 joining an already crowded field of candidates. Ran as a full-time candidate. Won the Republican Primary in Aug 2020... and the General Election against a Democratic opponent in Nov 2020.

Nov 2020-Present Elected to Office -- Serving as a full-time County Commissioner.

2023-2024 Once again, I was strongly encouraged by local citizens and organizations to run for reelection. My only opponent is a last-minute write-in candidate who surprisingly entered on the final day and hour of qualification. Running for office and serving in an elected capacity -- isn't a game... it's serious important work and public service. I'm proud citizens trust my experience, judgement, knowledge, and integrity... their overwhelming support has been amazing. I remind all that filing false police reports is a crime. It's disappointing during an election year when fictitious reports are taken seriously by anyone. Thankfully Collier County citizens completely see through this type of behavior for what it actually is... especially during election time when those running for public office are easy targets for those who want attention. We have seen this locally, statewide, and nationally. People are tired of these political games and vindictive individuals manipulating our legal system. Masses of local citizens know my resume, reputation... and as I've said -- most of all my integrity. Their desire to have me serve another 4 years has been extremely humbling. I look forward to my second term as a dedicated full-time public servant.

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Describe your community activities, either in elective office or as a volunteer, in the last five years.

- Leadership Collier Graduate
- Active Rotary Club Member
- Active American Legion Member
- Active VFW Member
- Active Volunteer for Warrior Homes of Collier County
- Senior Advisor & Board Chair to Senator Rick Scott's U.S. Air Force Academy Florida Selection Panel (2019-Present)
- Local Student Mentor & Advisor for Service Academy Applications/Admissions
- Frequent Emcee and Auctioneer for Local Non-Profit Organizations
- Current Chairman of the Collier County Tourist Development Council
- Former Chairman of the Collier County Board of County Commissioners
- Former Board of Directors for Marco Island Chamber of Commerce

What is THE most important issue facing the Board of County Commissioners today and how will you address it?

The most important issue facing our Board of County Commissioners is fiscal responsibility... and a vision and focus on priorities, proper planning, and monitoring performance -- and ensuring we communicate with our constituents.

Our Collier County \$2+ Billion budget might sound like a lot... but the money goes fast when hurricanes hit... and when roads, grounds, utility infrastructure, fire stations, parks, beaches, waterways, our animal shelter, etc... all need attention -- and in many cases have been neglected for years. Twenty years ago, County Commissioners across our nation were often those with the most volunteer hours... or who were personally known by-name across their community. However, times have changed... and it takes specific knowledge, experience, and qualifications to run any massive County... and to ensure our elected officials understand all the intricate workings and the many facets and legal requirements to do so correctly. Public servants now must have the depth to be able to question contractors, developers, high-powered attorneys, etc... and be able to digest a vast amount of information before any vote... and most importantly be accessible and communicative with all their constituents. Citizens who agree with them... and those who do not.

The most important issue facing County Commissioners today is not merely "collecting tax dollars" and amassing a \$2 Billion bank account -- but instead knowing how to properly manage and invest those funds to the best of our ability to ensure our County continues to grow and prosper -- and we Preserve, Protect, and Improve every area of our County. In this expensive location of Southwest Florida -- \$2 Billion doesn't go as far as most think. Fiscal responsibility and also a depth of understanding of what is legal... and how and where to best invest these funds is critical.

My major focus area when it comes to our County budget is to do a deep dive into all departments to see how we are spending taxpayer dollars... and where we might be wasting it -- and we ARE NOW doing just that. This current complete and aggressive "top-down" review is something our County has never done to this extent.

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I often bring up past County history... and where we have failed our citizens in many areas or simply made poor choices. Sometimes unknowingly because we didn't have a crystal ball -- but looking back and learning from our past performances (or lack of) is how we can ensure we don't repeat the same mistakes and how we can improve. Our greatest challenge isn't merely "collecting taxes" -- it's taking what we have and knowing how and where to utilize it... and being able to listen and communicate with our citizens so they understand what we are doing... what we can actually legally do and not do... and why. Utilizing the funds we currently have... and ensuring they are focused in the right areas... and also not being wasted in the wrong ones.

I have 75,000+ subscribers to a newsletter I personally write on a regular basis. I've had over 300+ town hall meetings across all of Collier County where I personally "Bring The Commissioner To The People" -- rather than just sitting in one location each and every time and telling people to come to me. Communicating with citizens in their own communities whether they are full-time or seasonal is critical to ensure they are fully informed concerning what the County is doing... how their tax dollars are being spent (or can be spent)... separating rumors from fact -- but most importantly to listen... and get their valuable feedback and concerns.

I regularly encourage citizens to ensure they do their homework before going to the polls. Many run to the polls knowing exactly who they are voting for President, Governor, Senator, Congressman, etc... but often when they see multiple names for County Commissioner, School Board, Fire Commissioner, Mosquito Control, Judges... and then a long list of Legislative questions asking them to vote YES or NO -- some often have not done enough homework to fully understand who and what they're actually voting for. Voting "alphabetically" or for a name you merely might recognize... or for a friend -- is dangerous business in these current times. As we've seen locally, across our state, and across the nation... a lot of good can be done in a 4-year term... but conversely a lot of destruction and poor leadership can also happen.

I pride myself on talking with our citizens... those who agree with me... and those who don't. As I've reminded candidates running in other races -- once the election is over -- there's no such thing as "voters" -- everyone is a citizen... and you are the public servant who represents everyone. Every vote and decision won't always make every person happy... but I would hope most informed citizens would look at the body of work of every elected official and grade them according to what they have done across the board... even if they disagreed with one or two decisions. Healthy dialogue and debate are what built this country and we need to ensure we keep discussions professional and productive. We have a lot to do in this County... and limited funds to do it... especially when we have catastrophic natural disasters, infrastructure failures, and the need for upgrades to address growth.

Having representatives with the Experience & Qualifications to actually do the job... and as dedicated public servants -- not "politicians" looking to check a box on a resume. Public service is a "calling" to give back to your community -- but those both running for office or already elected need to have depth in their backgrounds to actually have something to give back.

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Name one past policy decision of the Board of County Commissioners that you disagree with that you would like to change if elected. Why?

I think most citizens know I was the only County Commissioner who voted against giving Great Wolf Lodge \$15 Million in taxpayer money to “incentivize” them to come here. I've been very vocal stating it was obvious to me (and to most others) Great Wolf Lodge knew it was already a fantastic opportunity for them to settle here on an incredible strategically located piece of land in Collier County... and they were coming here regardless. When they gave us their final presentation there was nothing “hypothetical” about it. They already had blueprints, definitive plans, and were excited to tell us they were ready to put shovels in the ground.

When valuable tax dollars are needed in so many other areas of our County... I saw no reason to give Great Wolf Lodge what I called a “\$15 Million Christmas Gift”. To me and to most others there was no way they were going to turn around and walk out the door and build their resort in Timbuktu if they didn't get our \$15 Million taxpayer incentive. Unfortunately, my four other fellow County Commissioners disagreed -- and the \$15 Million payment passed 4-1.

Without a doubt we know their resort will create jobs, pay taxes, attract more tourists who spend money, and be a fun and exciting place for our local residents as well. However, my position was we would get all of those benefits automatically when they build and open... and in my opinion they were building regardless. I believe they floated their \$15 Million request just to see if we would bite... and unfortunately we did. It's disappointing now we sit in budget meetings at times searching for smaller amounts of money (and even larger amounts) for critical needs in our community -- repairs to our parks, fire station rebuilds, road and ground maintenance, beach restoration, etc... \$15 Million can go a long way in the County in other areas. I have no doubt Great Wolf Lodge didn't “need” our taxpayer funded \$15 Million to seal the deal... and were ready to build regardless if we gave them taxpayer incentive money or not.

However, I'm always consistent in explaining my vote. Regardless if I'm on the winning or the losing side -- we then move forward with whatever the majority decided. I certainly want Great Wolf Lodge to succeed... and I hope they bring everything to our community and surrounding area they have promised.

What actions, if any, should the County take to address the need for affordable housing? What actions should the County not take with respect to providing housing?

The County has done more for affordable housing in the last three years than probably the last three decades. The need for affordable/attainable housing hasn't been a secret over those many years -- but unfortunately in my opinion the can was kicked too many times. Just ask developers, business owners, Habitat for Humanity, and other organizations who were trying to address the problem over these many years... and they will tell you there wasn't much of an appetite, understanding, or especially action for the need. If there was -- there would be much more affordable housing across Collier County. I'm not saying we need it on every corner and in every neighborhood. Strategic planning and an

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understanding of where and how to best address this problem is required -- yes, it is complex and complicated -- but not impossible. We've cut the ribbon on quite a few affordable/attainable housing complexes scattered throughout Collier County in the last year. It's unfortunate many citizens say "the County has failed when it comes to affordable housing" -- but the minute an affordable housing project comes to Commissioners for a vote... some citizens within close proximity to the project demand we vote NO because they "don't want it in their backyard"... or come up with other reasons that stall the process and us addressing this dated and dusty problem. We can't build everything out in Immokalee hidden behind a forest of redwood trees. Affordable housing is needed in the heart of our community to support our workforce, first responders, medical staff, teachers, citizens, families, and retirees who are on tight budgets.

The affordable housing we have approved is some of the nicest and most aesthetically pleasing in our entire County. It's not "government subsidized housing" or built like the projects you would see in other cities. Affordable housing isn't merely a building -- it's a concept. The successful projects we have approved, built, and populated have been partnerships with developers who were interested in building rental units... but County Commissioners demanded a percentage of those units be priced at or well below the average rental price in our County. Those units aren't any smaller, less quality, or look any different from the full priced units. Drive by any of these communities and if you didn't know they had a percentage of affordable units -- nothing visually would jump out at you to say anything otherwise. So, informing our local population of what "affordable housing" actually means in our County... and the great need for it... is critical.

What don't we want to do? I and the vast majority of citizens don't support "government subsidized housing". Throwing tax dollars at the problem and having a continuous taxpayer bill to prop up some sort of government housing complex is what they do in some other cities... and I think we know what those structures all look like. Instead, when you have an active County Affordable Housing Advisory Committee and County Commissioners and staff who have great depth of knowledge in business, finance, contracting, and unique ways to negotiate a successful project with a developer and a community... you come out with something much better than what we see in other cities.

The County has taken aggressive actions to address this challenging need... but sometimes unpopular to a handful of citizens who seem to understand the need for affordable housing... but want us to squeeze it in somewhere else. No County Commissioner is trying to force feed a project that doesn't properly fit in any community... but when a successful plan is put together on a piece of property that does fit and makes sense in an area where the need for affordable housing is critical... we need our community to understand what the project actually is... and what it isn't.

Being a County Commissioner is not an easy task. We will never please all, but we also have to look at the needs of our community, the tax dollars we have at hand, and what we are legally allowed and not allowed to do. Sometimes doing the right thing is unpopular.

We have also recently overhauled Conservation Collier and bought, preserved, and protected more land in the last 8 months than has been done over the last decade or more -- that has been an amazing success. We need to continue to do the same for affordable housing and be open to specific areas where the idea, project, and location all make

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sense... with the right experts coming together with a smart plan... and where the end result will contribute to assisting our affordable/attainable housing needs.

What are your views about the role of government as they relate to the policies and actions of the Board of County Commissioners? How would these views influence your actions and decisions as a Commissioner?

The basic role of government is simple -- to represent the constituents of your designated area. However, after that it becomes a bit more complex because as an elected public servant you also have to understand the law as well as local, state, and national details in a multitude of areas. The citizens who I gain the most value from are the ones who I can have a professional dialogue with -- regardless if we agree or disagree. I greatly value their views and feedback. The role of an elected official is also to be available, reachable, approachable... and to absorb as much as possible from all sides of any issue before you vote on a topic. That's how you properly represent those you serve. Elected officials who have limited information on a topic but immediately blurt out their position -- I believe is often irresponsible. As a full-time County Commissioner, I take the time before any vote to dive deep into all issues... and my door is always open. I meet with citizens every day in my office or I go to them. The County senior staff and I have a very close relationship so I can utilize their expertise as well when I have questions or need to be better educated or informed on a particular issue coming to Commissioners for a vote.

Often some citizens will say "I voted for you and I pay your salary... this is what I want you to do"... and I do hear them. However, I'm a taxpayer as well -- so I also contribute to paying my own salary. Oftentimes, certain citizens' personal desires can conflict with the law and what we are actually able to legally do or not do. Merely saying "nobody wants something" or "we have a petition with hundreds of signatures... so you have to vote a certain way" -- at times can often be unrealistic. As I stated earlier, being an elected official at any level is a difficult job... but one I welcome. I've been very consistent in my votes... I don't rubber stamp things. I also use a large amount of my time through my newsletter, town halls, and meeting with citizens one-on-one to listen to their views and also explain the realities of a particular issue or vote. At times however, we might have to agree to disagree... but I feel judging any elected official on the one vote you disagree with is shortsighted.

If the role of government was merely to take a poll every time something needed to be decided... and majority would win... citizens would be running to the polling booths every week. That's why it's critical for citizens to do their homework and elect officials at all levels who they feel have the experience and qualifications to make the best decisions. The result however might not always be a decision all agree with.

I'm thankful for the 75,000+ subscribers I have to my newsletter. I personally write every word of it and utilize it to communicate clearly and transparently to those who receive it... explaining all important issues that are either coming to us as Commissioners or something we voted on and why I voted a certain way. There are always many sides to every issue -- especially legal ones.

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How do these views influence my actions and decisions as a current County Commissioner? Knowing the importance and great responsibility of this job is something I contemplated while deciding to consider running for County Commissioner in 2019 at the urging of many citizens... and also running for reelection now. I fully understand the weight and complexities of this job. For me to do it in a way I can be most proud of... I decided to push aside every other employment interest I had... and serve as a full-time County Commissioner... and will for my second term as well. Although I learn something new every day -- I feel blessed to have a solid foundation of experience, knowledge, and a strong moral compass. Being a dedicated, accessible, and committed servant leader who greatly values my integrity is what I'm most proud to bring to the seat for the constituents I serve.

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