



Below are 5 survey questions developed by our CBIA government affairs council responded to by various candidates running for office in the upcoming City Council and Mayoral elections on March 19, 2024. Candidates were requested to respond in 75 words or less.

1. Please clearly state your position on growth/redevelopment in the City of Naples and what criteria you will use to determine if a variance request will receive your vote?

COUNCIL CANDIDATES

Berne Barton: Our city currently has very good codes in place to control and plan our development. These codes should be adhered to so that we can continue to maintain the Naples Charm that we all love so much. However, petitions for variances should be heard and a commonsense approach should be implemented when considering variances.

Bill Kramer: The City of Naples has codes and ordinances in place regarding building requirements. People who follow the rules and codes should be helped through the process as quickly and efficiently as possible. A variance is just that. It is a one-off, it does not set precedent. Each rationale will be examined on its own merit without passion or prejudice. If it is at all within my power to do so, I will visit the site and talk to stakeholders before drawing conclusions.

Tony Perez-Benitoa: Growth and redevelopment are inevitable and must be managed judiciously. Application and enforcement of existing codes/ordinances must be adhered to with a view to only granting variances when there exists a compelling reason to do so.

MAYOR CANDIDATES

Ted Blankenship: I believe we should follow the criteria laid out in the ordinances. However, I believe these criteria need to be reviewed and updated in a thoughtful and transparent way with input from local architects and builders as well as from residents and our city staff.

Gary Price: In terms of growth and redevelopment, I advocate for a fair review process for all projects to ensure the highest quality redevelopment, reflecting our community's

standards. I prioritize adherence to established rules without changing them on petitioners, who have previously suffered from council's rule alterations. My approach to granting variances is rooted in compliance with the law, which is clearly defined. Drawing on two decades of experience, I evaluate each case individually, applying the law diligently to reach informed decisions based on available information.

2. What is your opinion on current staffing within the building/planning departments? Would you be in favor of hiring temporary planners, reviewers and/or inspectors should survey data warrant the need?

COUNCIL CANDIDATES

Berne Barton: There has been a significant issue with staff attrition within the ranks of the city departments. This attrition has caused several departments to operate less efficiently and effectively. It should be a priority to make sure that all departments are staffed properly so that they can be as effective as possible. If necessary, so that we can maximize efficiency, it may be necessary to fill positions on a temporary basis until we are able to bring the departments back to what would be considered “fully staffed”.

Bill Kramer: All our departments need to be evaluated regarding staffing. The City of Naples has lost an inordinate number of staff since the current mayor and council were elected. People are not widgets to be replaced like a plug and play. The historical and institutional knowledge that leaves with an employee is a valuable resource that is lost. It takes time to fill that void. New employees must learn all that the job requires, as well as the ergonomics and nuance of any organization. I will evaluate the data and consult with staff and do all I can to facilitate fixing whatever problems exist within the building/planning departments.

Tony Perez-Benitoa: The departments are fine but one must presume that staff is sometimes overwhelmed (permitting delays). I welcome all objective data in order to best address our City's needs.

MAYOR CANDIDATES

Ted Blankenship: Staffing appears to be thin. We have advised the City Manager and Planning Director that we were ok with hiring temporary staff and experts to expedite review and also to hire permanent staff if needed based upon expected needs. The Planning Director has very recently hired additional experienced staff, including one this week. If the industry representatives feel this is inadequate, then I would bring up the staffing again with the City Manager.

Gary Price: The current administration's lack of leadership has left the building and planning staff exhausted and overworked, fostering a toxic culture detrimental to our city. To address this, I propose hiring temporary planners and reviewers to alleviate the workload. However, my priority is to overhaul the culture, restoring respect for staff,

residents, and petitioners. It's imperative to return to the standards predating this administration's damage to our city.

3. If elected, what steps would you share with your colleagues on City Council to make the remodeling process easier in the City of Naples?

COUNCIL CANDIDATES

Berne Barton: The codes in place are solid. However, that does not mean that we should not always be considering ways in which we can improve a process that is of importance to the redevelopment of our City. We should consider changes if they make sense and can possibly improve our processes and procedures.

Bill Kramer: As I stated above, people who follow the rules and codes should be helped through the process as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Tony Perez-Benitoa: Notwithstanding adherence to codes/ordinances a common-sense approach to routine remodeling projects along with some form of a “fast-track” options should be explored.

MAYOR CANDIDATES

Ted Blankenship: I would schedule a workshop with the Building Dept director, representatives from CBIA, interested builders and others from the public to review the process and determine needed changes to make it more efficient. I would also include the IT director so that we can consider technology improvements.

Gary Price: One of my initial actions would involve reassessing the stormwater management mandate imposed on property owners recently. I believe we're overlooking the chance to preserve and renovate structures. Simplifying the permitting process and ensuring adequate staffing are crucial. Placing a \$40-50k stormwater project burden on homeowners seeking to remodel seems disproportionate and unnecessary. We should strive for a more balanced approach that respects homeowners' needs while addressing environmental concerns effectively.

4. What is your opinion of the current planning process in the City of Naples? What strategies would you recommend for improving this process. Please be specific.

COUNCIL CANDIDATES

Berne Barton: The first issue that needs to be addressed is bringing all departments in the city back to fully staffed operations. I believe that it is imperative that Naples hire experts/professionals in the field of city planning to help with developing a

comprehensive detailed city plan that would provide a clear guideline and process for development moving forward.

Bill Kramer: I have seen micromanagement and hindering of projects. The City Council needs to do their homework in advance, convene with the City Manager, his department heads, or designees for clarifications in advance of meetings, and then do all we can to facilitate those who are following the codes and ordinances that have been established. We have to get staff out of meetings and back to their offices so they can do their jobs.

Tony Perez-Benitoa: The planning process is satisfactory. It's the decision-making and execution of the decisions that is deficient.

MAYOR CANDIDATES

Ted Blankenship: I believe the process needs to be updated and would schedule a workshop on it to include the DRB and PAB Chairs, City staff, representatives from CBIA, and architects as well as the public and anyone else interested to collaborate on improvements. Again, I would include the IT director so that we can take advantage of technology improvements.

Gary Price: Currently, our planning process is lacking, as I've previously highlighted. The broken culture and overworked staff hinder our ability to plan effectively for the future. Addressing this, I propose hiring a planner, if necessary, dedicated to envisioning the town's future. This role would involve proactive planning rather than just reacting to petitions, incorporating real estate and urban analysis criteria to ensure a strategic approach to city development.

5. Collier County and other municipalities have determined that structures being built can go to FEMA plus 2 feet of free board. Would you consider presenting the option of giving another foot of free board in the City of Naples to your colleagues on City Council if you were elected?

COUNCIL CANDIDATES

Berne Barton: Hurricane Ian provided us with many lessons. We had not experienced flooding like that since 1960 (Hurricane Donna). It would be prudent to consider allowing 2 feet of freeboard if for no other reason than to help protect the residents of Naples and their assets. This option should be researched and considered.

Bill Kramer: I've only recently begun to investigate this, and I just don't know enough about it yet. I need to see some cost to benefit ratios to determine if the juice is worth the squeeze.

Tony Perez-Benitoa: I am not opposed to considering the additional foot of free board, but need to further educate myself regarding the repercussions.

MAYOR CANDIDATES

Ted Blankenship: Yes, I have previously recommended this to Council multiple times. The first time after Hurricane Ian, a majority of Council members (including the current mayor) were not in favor of it. The second time more recently a majority were in favor of discussing it. We directed the City Manager and Planning Director to schedule a workshop on it and invite interested parties to participate (architects, builders, etc.). I reminded Council and City staff of this again this week and the City Manager committed to schedule it.

Gary Price: Having endured the loss of our home during Hurricane Ian, I'm determined to enhance and strengthen our community's resilience for future storms, even by implementing an extra foot of freeboard. Collaborating closely with our team and council, I'm committed to exploring all avenues for improvement diligently. I will pursue measures that ensure the safety and well-being of our residents, striving to mitigate the impact of any future natural disasters.

***Note below candidate did not respond specifically in answering questions but sent a response.**

Garey Cooper: The questions you ask are legitimate concerns. As a candidate for city council, at this point, I do not feel I have the expertise to supply the right answer to all of them. They are interrelated and, in some cases, multi-faceted. I am interested in the topics and that is why I am running for the position so as to be able to enlist qualified local experts and learn what are the best solutions. As all residents of Naples share a stake in the decisions that are made, it is the job of city council to become informed about what comes before them and then react and respond. I feel the city currently lacks the qualified staff to add intelligent input to these complex topics. What I would bring to the council is the resolve to find the best professionals who can consult and advise as to the courses of action that will benefit the Naples lifestyle so coveted here. This is how the building blocks to improvement for the future are constructed. Thank you for the opportunity to reply.

The following candidates did not respond to our request:

Mayor Candidate: Theresa Heitmann

Council Candidates: Nicholas Del Rosso, Linda Penniman