

Stephanie Walker, Candidate for New Hanover County Commission

Voices to Votes NHC Candidate Questionnaire

1) If elected, what if anything will you change about planning, and the related rezoning process, to correct the current issues noted above? What factors will you consider most important when deciding how you will vote on a rezoning application?

There is clearly a significant need for development due to a housing shortage, which has been cited as one of the reasons for high housing and rental prices. A recent article from a homebuilders' site revealed that Wilmington, NC, is the number one mid-sized metro for building new units (<https://constructioncoverage.com/research/cities-investing-most-in-new-housing>). However, even with this increased inventory, prices have not dropped; in fact, they have often continued to rise rapidly, causing a financial burden for many.

We need to strike a balance between development, environmental impact, affordable housing, and housing inventory. I'm concerned that if we don't make wiser choices soon, it will cost us all more in the long run. This could lead to increased flooding, family displacement, a strain on emergency services, and even insurance companies refusing to insure our homes.

By-right development will be difficult to stop due to legal property rights, and Dillon's Rule limits local governments' authority. These laws need to be addressed at the state level, and I will work hard to advocate for those changes. However, locally, we must start asking the right questions about how we proceed, especially regarding the Special Use Permit (SUP) process. I've been researching ways to balance legal requirements with a system that better suits our coastal environment, taking into account critical issues like stormwater management, tree preservation, clear-cutting, and wetland infill.

I want to know whether a development fits the area in which it is being built. What environmental impact will it have on existing and surrounding developments? Does it align with county plans to address affordability issues? Is it helping solve the housing problems we face?

The county cannot work in isolation. We must collaborate with the city, state, developers, and non-profits, and also work regionally with neighboring counties to solve these issues. Our jurisdictions may have boundaries, but our communities do not. Years of developing wetlands, removing trees, and paving over permeable surfaces, coupled with rising sea levels and severe weather events, have contributed to the flooding and stormwater challenges we now face.

I would also like to see a more balanced planning board with members who objectively consider the scientific and environmental impacts of development—not just for the immediate proposal but for its broader impact on surrounding areas and the county as a whole. We need a comprehensive analysis that considers infrastructure like traffic, stormwater, environmental impact, and schools. These factors have been overlooked for too long, and we are now seeing the consequences.

2) Beyond staff's technical recommendations, and their interpretation of the Comprehensive Plan, often as "adding to housing stock/high density" and "mixed use", what information will you use to gauge the impacts (and long-term costs to taxpayers) of a development on the entirety of the county's systems including roadways, schools and the environment? Beyond the public hearing, when projects may have already been decided, would you support including citizens in the planning and rezoning process?

Some key questions to consider: What are the impacts on the stormwater system, watersheds, and school populations? How many trees will remain or be cut down, given that they help mitigate flooding? Are any wetlands affected, which also play a critical role in flood mitigation and water purification? Planning responsibly and thoughtfully now will save taxpayers money in the long run because storm cleanup is expensive and economically disruptive. It strains emergency services, causes potential work stoppages, affects roads, and can have negative consequences for all of us.

As a citizen with some experience in asking the right questions, I believe many local residents provide valuable input to these conversations. Without their involvement, I don't think we would have been as successful in presenting our concerns to the commission. One recurring issue I've noticed in these meetings is that schools are rarely considered part of infrastructure. This is concerning because the way schools are currently districted as "neighborhood schools" has led to overcrowding in areas experiencing rapid development. For example, Porters Neck Elementary has had to add four trailers due to the influx of students from nearby developments.

I believe citizens understand how certain developments will impact their communities and the overall quality of life in our county. There is a narrative that some residents simply complain and are labeled NIMBYs (Not In My Backyard), but as someone who has voiced concerns, I know that many of these individuals raise valid points. These citizens, who deal with real issues every day, speak to serious matters that outside traffic engineers or developers may not fully grasp. They often have firsthand experience with flooding in their neighborhoods, overburdened traffic and roads, and the increasing needs of local schools.

Here is an article about my own experience as a citizen advocating for sensible development in my community: <https://portcitydaily.com/local-news/2019/10/20/as-30-acre-mixed-use-development-heads-to-new-hanover-commissioners-ogden-residents-ask-to-slow-things-down/>

3) What specific steps will you take to address our population growth's impact on our already overcrowded schools and congested, unsafe roadways?

School districting is one of the primary reasons many schools are overcrowded under the "neighborhood schools" model. While there's nothing wrong with wanting to send your child to the closest school, rapid growth in areas like Ogden, Porters Neck, and River Road has led to severe overcrowding in certain schools. As a school board member, we recently conducted a school utilization study (https://drive.google.com/file/d/1dE892Fbr0UEKLGqI4XkN7ug_nHkgOF-N/view?usp=sharing), which was presented to both the school board and county commissioners

during a joint meeting. The study shows that many of our schools are at or over capacity, and with continued growth, the situation will only worsen. We **need** to have serious discussions about this. Our high schools, in particular, are well over capacity, which raises safety concerns. I've heard claims from local leaders that the student population will decrease, but this doesn't align with the data.

As for roads, while projects are underway to address traffic, travel times during peak hours remain a challenge. To manage growth, we should invest in a robust transportation system and make the area more bike- and walk-friendly. Infill development and mixed-use projects can help reduce travel needs, but they must be implemented more intentionally to optimize land use and ease traffic concerns. We also need a serious conversation about our public transportation system. If we had a more robust, reliable system, people would be more likely to use it, which would help alleviate the burden on our streets.

4) What will you do to balance the planning board members and planning staff to include more citizen, sustainability, resiliency and environmental representation?

I feel like this is already happening to some extent. The county has improved its efforts to listen to citizens, conduct surveys, and hold forums. They've also established a Sustainability Division and a Stormwater Division after Hurricane Florence. However, I've learned that sometimes these actions seem more about making citizens feel heard, while the real concerns are not always fully reflected in the decisions being made. The same issues keep surfacing—clear-cutting, wetland infill, stormwater and flooding problems, rapid development, lagging infrastructure, schools, and traffic—but decisions don't always address these concerns.

We have many smart, connected, and experienced citizens, non-profits, and retirees who bring valuable insights to the table. For instance, a large coalition of non-profits raised valid concerns regarding the bridge and the Western Bank development. However, it ultimately depends on who listens and makes the decisions for our county. I sense a shift, but we're past the point where leaders should simply be listening; we are at a pivotal moment in our county's history. If we don't act now, we'll face far more significant problems in the future, which would negatively impact both our safety and economy. There are ways to balance development that address these concerns while still allowing for growth.

5) Do you believe the pace and scale of residential development is in alignment with the wishes of current citizens? If not, what would you do to address this?

As mentioned earlier, building in Wilmington is happening rapidly (we're number one!). The logic behind this was that we're short on housing inventory, so the solution was to build, build, build, in hopes of bringing costs down. However, this hasn't lowered housing or rent costs; instead, it has led to an influx of apartments and dense developments that remain unaffordable for many. Given our limited space, I'm not opposed to vertical building, but it can't just be more apartments. I'm also amazed at the number of storage facilities being approved and built—I keep asking myself, why do people need to store so much stuff?

From what I'm hearing—and I hear it often—people are concerned about both the pace and scale of development. We need balance. New Hanover County is running out of buildable space. If we want to preserve the quality of life that has drawn so many here, we must adopt a Smart Growth mindset that is rooted in clear values. This means offering diverse housing options, addressing environmental concerns, preparing for natural disasters, and living in harmony with our unique coastal environment. Essentially, we live on a peninsula, surrounded by water on all sides (and in between), and we need to respect that.

6) What steps would you take to ensure that tree preservation ordinances are monitored for compliance and enforced to the maximum for development projects? What revisions to the code or the comprehensive plan are needed to ensure that we protect our area's aesthetic and existing mature tree stands and roadway buffers?

We must do a better job of protecting our trees and tree canopy. On my property, I've made it a priority to plant numerous trees. Many people may not fully appreciate the value of trees, seeing them as merely something pretty to look at. However, trees play critical roles: they provide habitats for wildlife, offer shade, produce oxygen, and improve both air and land quality. Additionally, trees absorb significant amounts of water—an average tree can absorb 20,000 to 60,000 gallons of water annually, which helps mitigate flooding. Clearcutting exacerbates flooding issues many times over.

The only way to ensure tree preservation is through stricter enforcement of ordinances. Protecting trees requires political will, robust policies, and diligent enforcement. We must clearly define our goals and stand by them. For instance, the 2016 Comprehensive Plan "encourages" tree preservation and encourages "conserving environmentally critical areas," but simply encouraging action is not enough. The plan also suggests educating the public on the value of ecosystems but states that guidelines are *not part of this strategy*. Vague guidelines fall short. We need clear, enforceable language and a firm commitment to achieving these goals. I hope the updated Comprehensive Plan provides more explicit direction on these matters, but it won't matter if the plan is not enforced with conviction.

7) What efforts will you make to restore and conserve New Hanover County's wetlands that protect our coastal community and neighborhoods against the full impact of storm surges, and floods against sea level rise?

It will be difficult to undo the damage caused by filling in wetlands and building homes on them, a practice that has been going on for many years. I was especially disheartened to see recent changes to wetland protection laws in North Carolina, which now allow wetlands to be filled in, with no protection from federal rules or state legislation. This recently occurred in Ogden, where a large wetland area was almost entirely filled in, and I am concerned for the safety of residents as a result. The filling in of wetlands must stop, and wetland restoration should be a priority wherever possible.

The North Carolina Coastal Federation is working hard to restore wetlands through their Coastal Resiliency Initiative, which focuses on defending against storms and sea-level rise. Their proactive approach to resiliency and recovery emphasizes the importance of wetland restoration. As their website notes, “While wetlands can’t protect us from the devastating flooding of a storm like Hurricane Florence, healthy habitats—and good planning—can shield us from some of the worst impacts and help our communities recover more quickly.” The Coastal Resilience Initiative strengthens our natural defenses by restoring habitats and protecting coastal communities.

Additionally, just this year, the NC Department of Natural and Cultural Resources broke ground on the "Living with Water" project, designed to rebuild a living shoreline and restore wetlands to protect the USS Battleship North Carolina from flooding. The project will restore aquatic habitats for wildlife, plant native trees and vegetation to support birds, reduce erosion, and restore wetlands to hold water and mitigate flooding around the battleship. If we can undertake such efforts to protect the battleship, we can certainly do the same to protect our homes and our quality of life.

8) In closing, many municipalities are getting it right, bringing balance to how they allow development to look and feel. How would you improve the way growth and development is occurring in New Hanover County?

The tools and knowledge to build sustainable communities are readily available, and there are many successful examples to draw from—that’s what it will take here. I know the City of Wilmington and New Hanover County have a comprehensive plan, which is currently being updated. The plan is in place, and many meetings have been held to move it forward, but it will require political will and dedicated effort to see it through. We must adhere to the recommendations and plans being laid out, look to initiatives that have worked in other cities, towns, and counties, and avoid being swayed by outside pressures.

In researching the principles of Smart Growth, I’ve come across examples of communities making a concerted effort to take action, partnering on initiatives that will help their communities thrive in the future. Leaders in these communities have taken a forward-thinking stance and made decisions to ensure long-term success. For instance, cities like Cary, Asheville, and Greenville, South Carolina, all include sustainability as a central theme in their comprehensive plans. They address critical issues such as affordable housing, intermodal transportation options, green space preservation, parks and gardens, and planning for future energy needs—elements that will position their communities for a prosperous future.

There are good examples of progress made locally as well. For instance, both the city and county parks departments have collaborated on projects like the Cross-City Trail, and we have great parks that promote walkability. Partnerships have also resulted in projects aimed at addressing the affordable housing crisis. However, we need to do more.