

NEWS

Meet the candidates: New Hanover County Board of Commissioners Republican primary

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Four Republican candidates are running in a primary race for two open seats on the New Hanover County Board of Commissioners.

The slate of Republican candidates includes two past challengers, the former mayor of Carolina Beach and a political newcomer.

The two spots on the board are opening up as the terms of Chair Julia Olson-Boseman and Commissioner Rob Zapple expire at the end of this year. Both Olson-Boseman and Zapple are running in the Democratic primary.

2022 Election: 7 candidates are vying for 2 seats on New Hanover County's Board of Commissioners

Commissioners serve four-year terms and have an annual salary of \$31,824. The board's chair has a salary of \$39,780 per year.

The three Democrats and four Republicans will face off in their respective primaries on May 17. The top two Democratic and Republican vote-getters will then move on to the general election in November.

Voters in New Hanover County have several options to cast a vote in this year's primary election.

Residents can vote before Election Day by mailing in an absentee vote or casting their vote during the One-Stop or Early Voting period, which begins April 28 and ends May 14. Early voting is held at five locations throughout New Hanover County.

Voters can also cast their ballot at any precinct on Election Day, which is Tuesday, May 17.

Joe Irrera

- Age: 62
- Occupation: Retired Marine colonel
- Family: Married to Sheila for 38 years with four adult children and three grandchildren
- Education: Bachelor of Arts from the University of North Carolina Wilmington, Master of Arts in strategic studies
- Political affiliation: Republican

Harry Knight

- Age: 58
- Occupation: Residential/commercial broker with a three decade career in nuclear industry engineering and management
- Family: Wife and daughter
- Education: Studied mechanical, material science, nuclear and environmental engineering
- Political affiliation: Republican

LeAnn Pierce

- Age: 50
- Occupation: Hotel owner
- Family: Two sons ages 25 and 29
- Education: Bachelor of Science in biology from East Carolina University, certified in business and technical communications from East Carolina University
- Political affiliation: Republican

Tom Toby

- Age: 50
- Occupation: Retired firefighter and small business owner
- Family: Married for 21 years with one 18-year-old son
- Education: Associate's degree in mechanical drafting and design
- Political affiliation: Republican

What is the biggest challenge facing New Hanover County and what would you do to address this challenge?

Irrera: Fiscal responsibility. We need to curb spending and lower taxes. Many factors contribute to the overall make-up of fiscal responsibility, but I plan to closely monitor spending. In concert with this, growth within the county will continue for the foreseeable future, so we must align infrastructure to meet the needs. Growth will be one of the primary economic drivers for New Hanover County and that should be viewed as a positive factor. I will continue to encourage the various creative types of development we are experiencing, such as Project Grace, the Soda Pop District, Castle Street and the Cargo District.

Knight: Our infrastructure must be accelerated to meet our population growth. The most visible sign of this is our congested traffic problem. We must work with private entities and the state to plan, prioritize and obtain funding to eliminate traffic congestion, move the CSX railway out of downtown Wilmington and replace the Cape Fear Memorial Bridge. Infrastructure must catch up with housing demand, the CSX railway continues to support the port, and the Cape Fear Memorial Bridge only has 10 years left. This has to be done without making the housing crisis worse. Slowing housing only creates another problem, not fixes one.

Pierce: Government that grows using temporary funding is not sustainable. During the pandemic, there have been injections of federal money, which New Hanover County has used to create programs and positions,

that will need staffing long after the federal dollars expire. Rampant spending increases need to be checked and this pattern risks putting our county into financial trouble. We are faced with addressing smart, sustainable growth and infrastructure required to support it. Finding a balance is the key. I will work with commissioners and staff to champion government that is efficient, designed to uphold public safety and not overburden citizens with taxation.

Toby: Our government is out of order and our county is out of balance. Our school board is battling with parents and allowing content students shouldn't be exposed to. Our county manager discriminates against employees. Two state agencies are investigating our board chair. Our commissioners deflected responsibility and unconstitutionally shut down our churches, schools, and economy. Growth and development are out of balance with infrastructure and pay scales. Our biggest challenge is our own local government. To address this I would: 1. Protect small business and attract jobs to our area. 2. Bring unity and cooperation to local boards. 3. Make sure local government sets an example while ensuring growth is in balance with infrastructure and our way of life.

What steps would you take to ensure affordable housing is accessible for all New Hanover County residents?

Irrera: Affordable housing encompasses a spectrum of housing needs. Fifteen million dollars was slated to assist with affordable housing. Housing will require monitoring and refining. The desirability to live in New Hanover County and supply and demand necessitate continual adjustments. Public and private collaboration is the best way to address this issue, ensuring homes are constructed at an affordable price. Part of the solution is aligning infrastructure with growth. We must bring in well-paying jobs so people can afford to live here. The median housing cost continues to increase, and we can mitigate that by increasing supply to close the gap.

Knight: Affordable housing is a two prong issue: The price of housing increased over 15% last year due to demand being higher than builders are supplying. We must incentivize builders to build affordable homes by helping with infrastructure costs while insuring that infrastructure is actually in place. Bring higher-quality, good paying jobs to New Hanover County so our working citizens can actually afford to buy a home. We need another GE or Corning plus expanding business along the U.S. 421 corridor by adding high pressure gas, for example, for manufacturing operations. Owning a home is part of the American dream.

Pierce: The lack of housing for those making less than 60% of the area median income is a serious problem that will require a deliberate plan with long-term strategies. The best way to improve this situation is to organically raise wages by attracting more businesses and providing more opportunities for residents. This is a supply and demand issue. The many nonprofits in New Hanover County know better than local government how to produce good outcomes. I plan to engage with outside organizations to address problems like homelessness, affordable housing and public transportation, rather than feeding the growth of government bureaucracy.

Toby: There is currently no real answer for this question. The biggest problem we have is we have a limited amount of space, and everyone wants to move here. People are flocking here and are willing to pay just about anything for property, driving up the cost for local families. The dwindling available land is driving up

property costs and increased material costs give no incentives to build low-cost housing. We can attract higher wage jobs to our area, fix our education system, stop teaching ideologies, and get students back to learning to increase their chances of getting higher paying jobs.

How closely do you believe New Hanover County officials should work and collaborate with leaders of the city of Wilmington and other municipalities and why?

Irrera: There most certainly should be collaboration between the city of Wilmington and other municipalities. I found great success in working at the tactical, operational and strategic level through collaboration in an interagency environment. These successes were in both the public and private sectors.

Knight: New Hanover County officials must work closely with the other major municipalities. What each does individually affects the group directly. An example of this is funding of WAVE Transit. Each organization provides a level of funding that is necessary for the entire system to operate. We must all collaborate on projects to ensure the best outcome and most efficient use of taxpayer dollars. Another example is municipalities approving a development that ultimately requires county or state resources, such as roads or water and sewer. If roads and utilities are not ready, that only makes our infrastructure problem worse.

Pierce: County leadership must become more collaborative with the municipalities contained within it. Too often, each jurisdiction's local government moves forward on its own path without joining together to act in the interest of New Hanover County as a whole. As mayor of Carolina Beach, I have experienced this disconnect. I will work to build consensus among elected officials and stakeholders to find common ground on complicated issues. We should be working together as a team for all the citizens of New Hanover County.

Toby: There should be a close working relationship with all local boards. We are a small county and one board's decisions can affect the region. For example, Carolina Beach's new policy of not selling parking passes to non-residents. Their desire for revenue is causing issues for Kure Beach residents and those over the bridge, which will hurt Carolina Beach. Further, being a tourist destination, we should work to enhance opportunities for the entire area. Tourists may stay at one beach or downtown, but they spend dollars across the region. Lastly, issues like Chemours poisoning our water are countywide issues.

As a member of the board, how would you determine which projects or initiatives should get funding in the county's budget?

Irrera: The capital improvement projects for 2021 to 2022 have been prioritized and align with the county strategic plan. They currently include the landfill, parks and recreational areas, a fire station, as well as an expansion for law enforcement facilities. Additionally, the ingenuity of our community in repurposing existing structures serves our county well. I would review and prioritize services most critical and reduce duplication when appropriate. Not every initiative that is proposed needs to or should be funded. It is the responsibility of the board of commissioners to establish priorities and remain within budget.

Knight: The first thing that needs to happen is better transparency on how money is spent. As I stated in my public dissent of the budget increase last year, you can't tell how revenue and spending is changing year over

year. That is unacceptable. It is taxpayer money and taxpayers should be able to see how and where the money flow changes. Budget items need to be prioritized to ensure spending is sustainable and necessary for keeping New Hanover the best county in the country. I've successfully run multimillion dollar budgets, and I can do the same for New Hanover County.

Pierce: I will prioritize and support projects that offer strategies for making a real impact to benefit the citizens. I am not a fan of short-term fixes that never address the real problem. We must support the needed infrastructure projects and I am supportive of projects that improve the quality of life in New Hanover County. Everything is a balance, and I hope to bring to the board of commissioners.

Toby: First, our budget needs to get back to being revenue neutral, period. Our area has seen a lot of money pumped in by COVID-19 relief, and our county is on a spending spree. That extra money is going to go away. We should not be using it for general budget issues. You approach the county budget the same way as your household budget: what do we have, what do we owe, what do we save, what's left over. Project priorities will change over time, just like in your household budget, so priority needs to be addressed on a case-by-case basis.

What makes you the best candidate to serve on the New Hanover County Board of Commissioners?

Irrera: I have a unique background and skillsets which combine proven leadership and decision making at senior levels in the private and public sector.

Knight: I have three decades of successful industry experience teaching students, interfacing with regulatory authorities, establishing and executing budgets, and managing large complex projects. I have the knowledge, depth and real life working experience needed on the board. New Hanover County needs experienced leadership working for the citizens, not special interest groups. As a retired professional and future commissioner, I have no allegiance to special interest groups and only care about the citizens of New Hanover County. I want to make it so that our current and future children can live and work here.

Pierce: My experience as mayor of Carolina Beach allows me to enter office ready to work. I understand how government works and how long it takes to be successful. I have experience making things happen quickly and efficiently and have built connections with people we must work with for New Hanover County to succeed. Understanding the importance of our beach towns and the revenue they generate, I will bring a perspective to the board that's been missing. As a small business owner, I have a diligent eye and will watch our county's finances. I believe government should be run like a business, and I know how to do that.

Toby: I am a lifelong resident of New Hanover County. I grew up in Monkey Junction, graduated from Hoggard in 1989, and Cape Fear Community College in 1993. I served as a firefighter and EMT for 26 years, rising to the rank of lieutenant. I am a small business owner who has grown my business every year, despite challenges. I have experience making difficult decisions under stress. I am not a politician -- politicians worry about elections. I'm worried about our future generations. I am and always have been a servant to the citizens, rooted deeply in New Hanover County.

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