

# ALACHUA COUNTY LABOR COALITION

## 2024 Alachua County Commission Candidate Questionnaire

### INSTRUCTIONS:

*Thank you for taking the time to respond to this questionnaire.*

*This questionnaire is divided into eight sections covering issues important to Alachua County Labor Coalition members and Alachua county's working class. Each section contains multiple questions (which are bulleted). Be sure to respond to each question, but please limit your responses in each section to 750 words (or less).*

*We will be hosting a public candidate forum to provide coalition members and the general public an opportunity to follow up on your responses. Separate forums will be held for commission and mayoral candidates.*

*The forum is scheduled for Thursday, August 1<sup>st</sup> at 6:00 PM (location TBD).*

*Candidates must return a completed questionnaire by Monday, July 22<sup>nd</sup> at 11:59 PM in order to receive an invitation to the forum.*

*Completed questionnaires should be returned to [Coordinator@LaborCoalition.org](mailto:Coordinator@LaborCoalition.org).*

*NOTE: The Labor Coalition does not endorse any candidates, and the inclusion of these questionnaire responses to our website should not be taken as an endorsement.*

## Labor and Wages

- Federal and state laws give most workers the right to form and join unions. Do you support or oppose the right of all private and public sector workers to organize a union?

I fully SUPPORT union organization for all workers.

- Would you publicly support workers in our community who are seeking workplace rights, including a living wage and the right to union representation?

I publicly support workers seeking workplace rights and have worked locally on to support any legislation or regulation in support of better working conditions and wages.

- The questions in this part relate to living wages, benefits, and economic inequality.

BACKGROUND: The Alachua County Commission [made significant progress on providing living wages for municipal workers, including part-time, temporary, seasonal, and contracted workers](#). This year, the state legislature passed, and the governor enacted [HB 433](#), which prohibits city and county governments requiring their contractors to pay workers a wage above the state's minimum wage after September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2026. Additionally, HB 433 prohibits local governments from requiring employers provide heat protections to their workers.

- How do you define a living wage?

A wage that allows a person to live independently and with dignity.

- What do you think the Commission can do to decrease the gap between wages and the cost of living in Alachua County?

The highest cost for most people is housing, and the cost and availability of housing in Alachua County has become more than challenging, there is a critical shortage of workforce housing. A contributing factor to housing cost is the cost of utilities. Given that many people choose to rent or are not yet able to purchase a house, they are subject to substandard conditions that often affect utility cost, anything from leaky faucets to poorly maintained HVAC systems to lack of roof insulation. Addressing the availability and energy efficiency of homes is therefore a significant way to reduce the cost of living.

Wage growth is finally outpacing the rate of inflation in the country, but I suspect this change has not been statistically significant in Alachua County due to the presence of the University of Florida. While the University of Florida plans to build luxury golf courses for alumni, lower

lever staff as well as employees performing the most basic supporting work on the campus make significantly less than a living wage. While Alachua County has no control over the wages paid by the University, I take every opportunity, including public opportunities, to reference the wage differences between the County and UF. The County's minimum wage is now \$17.50 per hour.

- What role should large employers in Alachua County play in helping improve wages, worker benefits, workplace safety, and reducing inequalities, if any?

In a well-functioning county large employers should consider themselves partners in creating a place where workers live dignified, successful, happy lives. This should include recognizing the cost of living and worker needs and adjusting wages and benefits accordingly. Employers should recognize that lower wage employees need quality, low cost health insurance due to the State of Florida's refusal to fund the Medicaid gap. Workplace safety is in everyone's best interest since workplace incidents that result in long-term disability or death may ultimately cost the community in the support of the family, and creates an environment that is not conducive to mutual respect and quality work. While many of the large employers support reasonable employee safety programs, all you need to do is watch for hardhat and tie-off requirement violations to know how well those safety programs are enforced. Middle management must be held accountable for managing safety rather than tacitly approving dangerous behavior (often in the name of efficiency) and placing the blame on victims when accidents due eventually occur. Part time employees should have access to all the safety training, certifications, certificates or other programs that affect employee performance and safety that full time employees have.

- How would you encourage local employers to address these issues, **in light of the state's recent preemption of local governments requiring contractors to pay their employees a living wage?**

While we may not be able to require them to pay a higher wage, as I understand it we can still give priority to firms that do pay a higher wage. We can state our philosophy around a living wage in our RFP documents and include wages and employee benefits in our point system for evaluating and selecting RFPs.

## **Housing**

- How can the County and/or its partners build significant new housing for our workforce?

The County has been working to fund the County's Housing Trust Fund, and we have a portion of the Infrastructure Sales Tax that can be used, in limited ways, for housing. Singly, the County's money will not make a significant impact. There simply is not enough of it given the cost of construction. However, by carefully working towards appropriate public private partnerships, we can partner with for-profit entities to incentivize them to create the housing that we need, be it rental or homesteaded.

- What partners do you envision the County working with on such an initiative?

I would love to see partnerships with the schools, with healthcare providers, with Meridian, and with public safety to provide workforce housing. Many of our schools have excess property around existing schools. We could provide apartments in these areas for teachers as well as for families experiencing housing instability. Imagine the benefit to a struggling student with truancy issues of living on or adjacent to the school campus? Likewise, I envision healthcare housing in the Oaks Mall parking lot or housing for people with mental illness or using housing for public safety workers as part of an inclusionary zoning proposal.

- How should the County balance the need for both workforce rental housing and workforce homeownership opportunities?

There are a lot of right answers when it comes to housing and we need to be doing most of them. There is a shortage of all kinds of housing, and we need to support a wide range of efforts. Relying on the excellent work from local resources like the Shimberg Center for Housing Studies at the UF to make sure we addressing the breadth and depth of the housing problem is important. Doing periodic gap analyses and reallocating resources as necessary is key. Right now my main concern is the effect of the Central Receiving Facility, a facility to evaluate people in crisis, deescalate the situation, provide them with resources and redirect them to those resources rather than jail. The goal is to remove individuals from the criminal justice system that don't belong there. However, we DO have to have a place for them to go, and most of the specialized housing units (such as New Horizons Properties, that provide housing to those with mental health challenges) are full and have waiting lists. So, this must be a priority concern if we are going to be successful in lowering jail populations and reducing recidivism.

- Do you support or oppose mandatory inclusionary zoning in unincorporated Alachua County?

We will need to strongly consider an inclusionary zoning policy in response to the City of Gainesville passing a mandatory inclusionary zoning ordinance a few days ago. If we don't

then development will likely migrate to the unincorporated area to avoid the regulation and associated costs. I would expect and support staff to evaluate the city's policy, perform a risk analysis (since Gainesville is expecting litigation), and recommend a similar course of action. Note that I have supported inclusionary zoning prior to this development.

- The questions in this part relate to local-level renters' rights protections.

BACKGROUND: Alachua County created the [Residential Rental Unit Permit Program](#) a comprehensive rental housing ordinance in 2022 that required: landlords or property managers to inform their tenants of their legal rights and responsibilities, universal health and safety inspections, and cost-saving energy and water efficiency standards. The County also passed a Fair Housing [ordinance—which prohibits landlords and property managers from discriminating against renters](#) on the basis of lawful source of income (e.g., Section 8 vouchers), citizenship status, domestic violence survivor status, gender identity, and more.

In 2023, the state legislature passed, and the Governor enacted [HB 1417](#), which preempts city and county governments from requiring many, but not all, of the protections in the Residential Rental Unit Program and Fair Housing ordinances. [View the legal analysis provided to the ACLC on options similar to those in the rental permit program still available to local governments here.](#)

- Do you support or oppose restoring protections formerly guaranteed by the County's Residential Rental Unit Program, provided they are designed in a way that does not violate state law?

I am proud of the work our county has done around renter's rights, including the residential rental unit program that the governor preempted as we were preparing implementation. Our attorneys spent some time analyzing the ordinance looking for opportunities to provide additional protections within the scope of the law. We also have had conversations about which battles we want to fight about with the governor. Strategically we may need to lay low in one area while we accomplish one thing before we jeopardize all of our actions by initiating challenges against the intent of a law (though we may have right based on the letter of the law). All that being said, I look forward to sitting down with our legal team and getting their response to your legal analysis and formulating a strategic action plan accordingly.

- What options for protecting renters do you think are available to the County, **in light of HB 1417?**

Again, I would defer to our excellent legal team. While they may sometimes appear conservative, I have found them to be candid in staff level meetings, providing likely risks and consequences for various scenarios we could consider. And, again, I look forward to sharing your legal analysis with Alachua County’s legal team and getting their response. Ultimately, we are fiscally responsible for taxpayer dollars, and risking those dollars being paid to attorneys because we did not make a carefully considered decision does not fall into the realm of fiscal responsibility to me. Legal challenges are appropriate and necessary, particularly in these tumultuous times, but rather than our small county taking on those costs we tend to support lawsuits filed by our more fiscally endowed neighbors like Palm Beach County or Orange County.

While HB 1417 does not preempt local prohibitions on Fair Housing ordinances generally, it does make it difficult to enforce the requirement that landlords and property managers only consider “the portion of the rent that the Section 8 voucher holder is required to pay out-of-pocket (as determined by the local housing authority issuing the voucher) in any rent-to-income financial qualification calculation.”.

- What will you do to see that the County’s Fair Housing protections for Section 8 voucher holders are enforced, in light of HB 1417?
- What will you do to see that the County’s Fair Housing protections for survivors of domestic abuse, immigrants, trans people, and others are enforced, in light of HB 1417?

I am going to answer the above questions together. The issue with enforcing these protections has to do with making people aware that they are protected, and making people feel comfortable and safe as they come forward to challenge their landlords. This is first a communication problem and secondly, a program design and staffing problem. The county is continuously improving their citizen engagement process, and we hear from citizens that do engage with the county when the process does not work. However, many of our most vulnerable citizens do not come forward at all. Most recently, in conversations with the Human Rights Coalition, the Women’s Rural Health Initiative and GINI (Gainesville Immigrant Neighbor Initiative), I became aware of the language limitations in County communications. We are working rapidly, especially in the face of hurricane season, to close those gaps. We are also finding, as we seek to implement a robust citizen engagement process, how difficult it is to reach across all segments of our County. We recently experimented with a process where we paid local outreach groups to work with us on citizen outreach. We engaged groups like the Women’s Rural Health Initiative, BLAAC2Basics and others. This achieved multiple goals – it increased engagement and it put

money into the pockets of these organizations. I hope to continue to explore creative ways to educate our diverse community and help them connect with resources that can provide information in accurate and culturally relevant ways that make them feel safe and comfortable in challenging legal situations. Finally, I believe that it is important to have safety net and backup plans, because despite laws, when people bring challenges they sometimes end up in spaces and places where they feel unsafe. I am working toward a day when we have available, dignified emergency housing for anyone that needs it, whatever the reason. Housing for ALL, all the time. It may not happen during my tenure, but I can lay the groundwork for that goal.

## **Criminal Justice**

- How would you reform Alachua County Court Services to encourage the kind of courtroom advocacy required for the more frequent and robust use of diversion programs?

I sit on a recently reorganized Justice and Mental Health Collaborative Program – a subcommittee of the Public Safety Coordinating Council which had been dissolved due to the end of the grant it was formed to support. This new committee, which we pitched to the Public Safety Coordinating Council for approval, includes representatives from court services, law enforcement, mental health services, the county commission, community advocacy groups focused on justice, jail administration, and others. The goal is to look at all aspects of the criminal justice system with the goal of reducing jail populations. This will not only include diversion programs but a robust and well-funded reentry program to reduce recidivism. One

## **Food**

- What will you do about providing access to non-processed, real food options to communities in Alachua County that don't have access to it (i.e., food deserts)?

Since being elected in 2020 I have worked to increase food security, whether getting people interested in growing a few things in their own yard through my Plant of the Month program or by supporting food systems work, or by putting agricultural lands in conservation easement by buying development rights, to more direct methods of providing incentives to shop owners to carry fresh milk and vegetables along with beer and cigarettes. There are multiple projects underway, including a planned grocery store in east Gainesville, mobile farmer's markets, and a regional food hub. Admittedly, this is Commissioner Prizzia's domain and I have supported her well researched and thoughtful work and will continue to do so. I also want to mention that there are food deserts that are not likely to see new a retail food store, and we have many people in those locations that are transportation challenged. I have talked and will

continue to discuss the need for some sort of regional public transportation. RTS is not regional, despite its name, and we need people from outlying areas to be able to travel to obtain healthy food, healthcare, and have a better quality of life. I believe we can and should solve this problem.

- What partners do you envision the County working with on such an initiative?

The towns and cities surrounding Gainesville, and perhaps even some of the surrounding counties. The school board assists in food distributions and we could work to make those distributions healthier and fresh food focused. The faith-based community already helps, doing multiple distributions across the county each week, many in areas that are far from grocery. Sometimes these distributions include fresh vegetables, meat and fruit, and sometimes they are an odd assortment of unwanted commercial products, stale bread and too many sweet bakery items. Better coordination between these distributions could be one way of getting fresh foods to the residents. Providing a central storage location for frozen and fresh foods and a refrigerated truck could also increase availability and provide better food safety (I have been concerned, during some of these distributions, about meat and dairy products being distributed at close to room temperature).

## **Corporate Responsibility**

- What will you do to ensure UF is a better community partner in Alachua County (e.g., union neutrality, living wages, payments in lieu of taxes, helping to ensure better access to quality housing, etc.)?

This is a hard question. Since we have little to no control over UF's actions (as has been evidenced during Ben Sasse's short but horrific tenure), we can only draw attention to the disparities and their lack of community partnership and lack of responsibility for their impact on our residents and neighbors. As I stated previously, sixty thousand people commute to Alachua County from counties that have lower costs of living and UF/UF Health are the primary employers of these people. UF likes to tout their green buildings and their focus on sustainability, but there is nothing sustainable about sixty thousand cars on the road. UF continues to reduce the amount of affordable housing for students and employees alike. UF Health has little buses that make little circles between their parking lots every 15 minutes – what if some of these buses made larger circles to East Gainesville or even to Archer or Hawthorne? Providing transportation to a family is equivalent to a significant raise. I am aware this is not



answering the question but this type of information needs to be discussed in all public forums (including Tallahassee) in order to facilitate awareness, and hopefully, change.

- What levers does the County have to pressure UF into being a better presence?

See above. I will add, as we look for partners in housing, we should reach out to UF and make them tell us “no”. They should be willing to partner to provide housing for their people making entry level salaries.

- How do you plan to balance the needs/desires of constituents and business interests, and in which areas and do you think they are most in conflict right now?

One place they are in conflict is in the area of housing. We need affordable housing, our developers say that can't afford to provide it. Some of our local developers offered to provide a proposal to encourage developers to build more affordable housing. I saw their first draft of a response to staff. They asked for a list of changes that basically lower the cost of all construction. Yes, that puts more money in the developer's pocket, but that proposal included no guarantee of building more affordable housing, it only guaranteed a higher profit margin. However, we will continue to work out a plan to require inclusionary zoning or incentivize it so that it will actually be built since the developers have shown no willingness to provide it with the incentives we already have in place.

Another area of conflict is between our local businesses and our unhoused neighbors. Yes, the new state law does force the City to relocate certain homeless populations but that law does not go into effect for a few more months. The County is providing approximately 100 units of permanent supportive housing that should help, but businesses should be working with us to solve this problem. I asked Mayor Ward to join me to declare a state of emergency for housing but he did not follow up after our multiple meetings. My plan had been to approach the Builder's Association and others in our business community and ask them to work with us to solve this problem both with ideas and with cash. Neither the City nor the County have the resources to solve this problem alone, but with cooperation and funding we could make amazing things happen, I am sure of it.

### **Miscellaneous**

- What actions should the county take to support GRACE Marketplace and other programs targeting homelessness.

Some time after Grace Marketplace opened, the City and the County agreed that Grace, by itself, cannot solve the problem of homelessness. Someone needed to provide (and fund) permanent supportive housing, which was an even larger financial commitment than Grace. The County, because we have our Community Services and Housing departments, took on permanent supportive housing while the City took on Grace. The County has continued to work with Grace to provide services to residents and work on housing plans. However, the County does not have the financial capacity to do both. We expect the City to continue to fund Grace. The County made a one-time financial commitment to Grace last year because we were told the City had no money. After we did that, the City somehow found large sums of money for other pet projects, so that felt very disingenuous. I really don't appreciate the City implying that the County is not doing their part when, in fact, it is the City not following through with their commitment. We should be working together for the good of ALL residents. We should be open, honest and in real partnership together for the good of all our citizens.

- As the city of Gainesville has made cuts to its budget and may be forced into making more in the future, how do you feel about the county taking over services from the city both in the future and present?

Again, I am concerned when the City talks about cuts to the budget and then at the end of the day, there were not cuts to the budget, there were cuts to programs and money was spent in other areas. There was a lot of talk about eliminating positions but most of the positions eliminated were by attrition and employees were shuffled about rather than being fired. New positions were funded, new programs were funded. I am happy to help out the City but the County has been fiscally conservative and I don't think we should jeopardize the County's financial security to help out the City until they are willing to make the same sacrifices we do. My county laptop computer is almost six years old, I don't have the latest tablet. Our employees are paid less, but we do salary studies and adjust accordingly. And, we have amazing employee retention. We choose used furniture for our offices. I chose NOT to travel to Sweden and Poland this year even though I was invited to both places in my role as Chair, and that travel was justified. Until the City takes their budget cuts seriously, I am going to consider their requests for funding very pragmatically. I will not accept being called as the bad guy in the room for refusing to fund programs that the City just wants to cut so they can fund something else.

- What services should be prioritized?

Two services the City should relinquish to the County are the Regional Transit System and Gainesville Fire Rescue. The Regional Transit System has been prioritized as a service to only Gainesville residents and to UF. However, we are in desperate need of actual “regional” service. Allowing the County to reorganize and expand RTS could assist residents in multiple ways and relieve some of the City budget (since they tell us the system runs at a loss). Alachua County already provides the emergency medical services to the entire county, but the Alachua County Fire Department operates in a doughnut around the City of Gainesville. While there is good cooperation between the City and County Fire Departments, there would be great efficiency in combining the two – efficiency in operations, in budgeting, in equipment and training, etc. This almost happened some years back, but negotiations broke down as the merger was in the final stages of discussion. City support for this merger could restart those discussions.