



ENDORSEMENT QUESTIONNAIRE 2022

Rishi Bagga

**Running for
Florida House of Representatives
District 35**

Candidate Information

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1. What motivated you to run for this position?

I am running for office because Florida needs new leadership. Our state legislature's actions are increasingly motivated by partisan politics rather than common sense, and I strongly believe that new voices are needed in Tallahassee.

I became motivated to run for the State Legislature after observing the legislature's lack of meaningful action to address the rise of gun violence and hate after the horrific mass shootings at Pulse and Parkland. I began my legal career as a prosecutor and handled numerous domestic violence and gun violence cases; I am sadly well-acquainted with the daily toll that gun violence has on our citizens beyond the pandemic of mass shootings.

I am a proud Sikh American; my faith community was the target of a mass shooting in Oak Creek, Wisconsin after a white supremacist opened fire at a Sikh Temple killing 7 congregants. This incident brought the rise of hate crimes and the epidemic of gun violence to the forefront for me, and I have since been compelled to act on these issues. I joined young members of my own Sikh congregation in Oviedo, Florida to help organize open houses and build relationships with other faith groups locally. I eventually became the President of the South Asian Bar Association of North America, and worked to help increase visibility for South Asian Americans and to help leading lawyers from our community fight hate against South Asian communities at the national level.

After Pulse and Parkland, hate and gun violence were closer to home than ever before. I looked to our legislature and hoped that meaningful action would be taken to address these issues. Unfortunately, our legislature's actions have gone in the wrong direction; they have allowed the arming of teachers, failed to consider common sense gun safety legislation, and have expressed a willingness to allow for the open carry of firearms without a permit. I am further dismayed by the attempts to loosen gun laws, such as recent efforts to allow for "open carry" of firearms.

Furthermore, the legislature has gone the wrong direction as it relates to fighting hate. Florida's legislature has failed to strengthen hate crime laws to extend to crimes that are motivated by gender, gender identity, disability, or where there are "mixed motive" crimes. Beyond just criminal punishment, I firmly believe that the best time to stop hate is when kids are young. Our schools can be a forum that encourages dialogue and understanding, when we talk to students about other cultures, races, genders, different types of families, and different ways to love. Unfortunately, the legislature's actions have only sought to

prevent this dialogue. Just this past legislative session, legislation such as the “Stop WOKE” Act and “Don’t Say Gay” bills actively discourage vital dialogue in our schools.

These failures by the legislature can only be addressed by electing new representatives, requiring that new candidates step forward. This need for new leadership motivated me to run.

2. What does being an ally or advocate for the LGBTQ+ community mean to you?

An ally does more than simply accept members of the LGBTQ+ community; an ally commits themselves to actively working towards equality for members of the LGBTQ+ community. This means educating themselves on issues facing the LGBTQ+ community, standing up against policies and laws that negatively impact the LGBTQ+ community, and working to create safe and welcoming spaces for members of the LGBTQ+ community in other communities, such as in racial, religious, and professional communities. In short, an ally makes sure that LGBTQ+ Americans are heard, included, and represented.

3. Please summarize your history of community involvement. This may include city boards, civic associations, non-profits, etc.

I am a member of the Advisory Counsel for South Asian Bar Association of North America (SABA North America) and previously served as the national President of the organization, as well as the State President for the Florida chapter. I previously was a member of the National Association of Bar Presidents. I am one of the founding members of the South Asian American Democratic Caucus for the Florida Democratic Party and serve as the Caucus Chair for Orange County.

In addition, I sit on the board for the India Center at the University of Central Florida, the Dean's Advisory Counsel for UCF's College of Sciences. I am a member of the Indian American Chamber of Commerce and the Indian American Business Association. I am a volunteer mediator for the Ninth Judicial Circuit of Florida's Dispute Resolution Program. Finally, I am an active member my temple, the Sikh Society of Central Florida, and regularly volunteer in our langar (free community kitchen) and for other events and needs.

- 4. Please summarize any work you have performed in the past five years to further LGBTQ+ rights. This may include paid positions, volunteer work, and donations.**

I have been an outspoken advocate for diversity and inclusion within the legal profession, including the LGBTQ+ legal community, as President of SABA North America from 2017-2018. I further advocated for inclusion of Indian American members of the LGBTQ+ community while in this position and in my other advocacy work within the Indian American community. I have also attended events for and donated to Equality Florida (I cannot recall if I did this in my personal name or in the name of my family business, Skyline Hotels).

Questions

- 5. The rise in anti-LGBTQ+ legislation barreling down from Tallahassee has caused a sharp increase in discrimination and violence against the LGBTQ+ community in Orange County. How would you go about reducing discrimination in your district or local community? How would you measure your progress?**

First and foremost, I strongly oppose the numerous pieces of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation passed by the legislature. This legislation must be repealed immediately and, if elected, I would be proud to help in this effort. Beyond repealing this legislation, elected officials can play an important role in centering LGBTQ+ issues. I would use my platform as an elected official to bring visibility to members of the community, advocate for passing and strengthening anti-discrimination and hate crime laws, and ensure that programs that assist the LGBTQ+ community are adequately funded.

There are, of course, objective measures of progress: bills actually passed/repealed, a reduction in the number of hate crimes, fewer discrimination complaints. However, with the current composition of the legislature, such results may not be easily achieved. Still, continuous advocacy regarding discrimination and hate crime issues does lead to long term progress, even if not readily measurable.

- 6. Elected officials and office staff are still woefully under-educated on the transgender community. This means that the services their offices provide are often ignorant of the needs of the transgender community. What actions would you take to ensure that the services your office will provide will be educated on and cognizant of the needs of the transgender community?**

I personally commit to becoming better educated on the issues and needs of the transgender community, and if elected, I would ensure that members of my staff are educated on these issues as well. I would also ensure that my office and I meet regularly and work closely with members of the transgender community to ensure we are being responsive to their needs and make sure they know that they have a friend and ally.

- 7. The Florida Republican Party is leading the country in stripping away LGBTQ+ rights, starting with our children. Students are having their lives and livelihoods placed at risk by laws such as the Transgender Sports Ban, the so-called Parental Bill of Rights, and now Don't Say Gay. These shamelessly discriminatory bills are forcing LGBTQ+ families to reconsider their future in Florida. What would you tell the parents of LGBTQ+ children in your district who feel they need to leave Florida in order to protect their children?**

As stated before, I strongly disagree with these discriminatory laws and would work hard for their repeal. I would want parents of LGBTQ+ children in my district to know that they have strong allies who are fighting for them. I would want parents to know that our local laws and services are more protective of LGBTQ+ rights than state laws, despite the constant threat they face through Republicans' constant efforts to preempt. I would make sure that these parents know of private resources that are available to their children should they need them. Finally, I would encourage these parents to advocate for change; if they add their voices, they can be powerful advocates against such discriminatory legislation.

- 8. The Trevor Project's 2022 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health found that 45% of LGBTQ+ students seriously considered attempting suicide and 1-in-5 LGBTQ+ attempt it. How would you lead on this issue and work to decrease these statistics over the course of your term in office?**

We must work to create an environment in schools that embraces and encourages diversity, open dialogue, and establishes school as a safe space for young people. As stated above, bills such as "Don't Say Gay" are incredibly destructive to that environment and must be repealed. Furthermore, we must fully fund schools and school professionals so that they can provide necessary social support and mental health services for all students. I strongly believe that a supportive, safe environment in schools can greatly assist LGBTQ+ and all other students and work towards lowering suicide rates amongst youth.

- 9. The same survey by The Trevor Project found that nearly all transgender and non-binary students have had to worry about their access to gender-affirming healthcare, bathrooms, and sports teams being taken away from them. How would you work to take this fear off their shoulders so that they can go back to just being kids?**

As stated in my prior response, we must work to ensure that schools are safe spaces for students. To that end, I oppose policies that deny access to gender-affirming healthcare and proposed legislation that would do the same. I further oppose school policies that disallow transgendered and students from using the bathroom for the gender with which they identify. Finally, I oppose and would support the repeal of the Florida law barring transgender females from playing on public school teams. I would support legislation that would ensure that transgender students have equal opportunity and access in all public schools.

- 10. Far-right groups are pushing to ban books on any topic they find disagreeable, such as books on Black history and experiences, immigration, the LGBTQ+ community, climate change, etc. Do you support these book bans? If not, what is your plan to counter them and ensure students have access to a full array of age-appropriate knowledge and experiences?**

I firmly oppose these book bans – while there have always been limitations on the resources available to students based on age, these subject-matter limitations are plain censorship and are an effort to close their minds to diversity. I would work to repeal HB 1467 that allowed for the banning of books. Although I would need more time to analyze the law from a constitutional perspective, I would be supportive of lawsuits challenging the constitutionality of the legislation (to the extent I would have standing to do so). It is interesting to note that, since the passage of this law, there has been an increase in the private sale of “banned” books and free sources that circulate these books and to the extent I could bring light to these resources I would do so.

- 11. During a town hall in your district, a constituent describes being gay or transgender as a "lifestyle choice." What is incorrect about their description? How would you constructively respond in this situation?**

The description of being gay or transgender as a “lifestyle choice” is incredibly misguided and damaging. It furthers the misconception that being gay or transgender is a choice rather than their identity. Allowing such commentary to persist unaddressed furthers this inaccurate and hurtful sentiment. Thus, it would important to correct the constituent immediately, explain why they are incorrect, and to encourage them to learn more about this issue from reputable sources.

- 12. During a board meeting, the board chair purposely refers to a transgender woman as “he” and “him” as the woman attempts to give her public comment. The woman corrects the board chair each time, insisting that her pronouns are “she” and “her.” The board chair continues to misgender the woman until she eventually leaves the chamber in tears. How would you respond in this situation?**

Such action by the chair must be immediately condemned. I would act to acknowledge the transgender woman and her identity immediately, and would try to ensure that she had the opportunity to provide her public comment or would assist her in doing so in whichever way possible.

- 13. A parent approaches you at an event, insisting that her son’s teachers have “groomed” him into liking boys. Her son is at her side when she says this. How do respond to the parent’s statement such that the young boy leaves feeling better about himself?**

I would counsel the parent that if the child likes boys, the boy's sentiment and/or preference is natural, normal, valid, and who he is, not something he was taught in school. I would ensure that the son knew that there are resources available for him. I would also let the parent know that if the parent had real grievances with the school’s teacher, the parent should address this through the appropriate channels.

- 14. Orange County continues to embrace urban sprawl, despite a plethora of data that links urban sprawl to severe strains on our housing, employment, healthcare, and public transit systems (to name a few). What are your thoughts on Orange County's growth? What could Orange County in terms of development that would better serve the communities in your district?**

Growth and development are realities in Orange County; demand is high for housing in Orange County and if supply is not increased, rental and purchase prices will increase which could exacerbate our housing crisis. At the same time, we must ensure that growth protects our irreplaceable natural resources and does not strain transport, healthcare, etc. Government should thus incentivize additional housing supply in a manner that prioritizes multi-family, urban infill, and non-traditional housing rather than suburban single-family homes through expedited permitting and other incentives. Where possible, development should build “upwards” rather than “outwards”. I also support growing and fully funding public transportation and encouraging more intercity rail.

15. Do you support the idea of constructing more multi-family homes in neighborhoods traditionally zoned for single-family homes? What impact would this have on your district?

I generally do support increasing the construction of more multifamily homes and, where possible and appropriate, updating zoning regulations to allow for such construction. Admittedly, this is unlikely in many areas of my district; the district is primarily suburban and large portions are HOA-controlled or are natural preserves (i.e., Hal Scott Preserve and Split Oak). Nonetheless, where such rezoning could be encouraged, I would certainly be supportive.

16. Homeowner Associations often prevent homeowners from transitioning their lawns away from non-functional grasses such as turf and towards sustainable options such as native Florida plants and edible landscapes. HOAs insist that moving away from the traditional pristine green lawn would lower housing prices. What is your opinion on this issue?

I strongly support urban farming and am proud to have a small (but growing) edible garden behind my own home. I do think HOAs should be encouraged to update their covenants and restrictions to allow for more edible gardening, fruiting trees, and more native plants. In all candor, I have represented both HOAs and been on the other side of HOA litigation as well, and am thus very familiar with HOAs and their workings; this type of change will not happen overnight. Encouraging the development of more urban and school farms in parks and public areas will likely assist in normalizing urban gardening and will hopefully encourage HOAs to allow for this change.

17. What are the top environmental concerns you are seeing in your District and what are the solutions you plan to bring forward if you were elected?

My district contains some of the most important natural resources and landscapes in Central Florida, including Hal Scott Regional Preserve, Split Oak Forest, large sections of the Econlockhatchee River, and countless natural lakes. My district is also one of the fastest growing in the region with major developments through Southeastern Orange and Eastern Osceola counties. Thus, the single greatest concern facing my district is ensuring that this development does not destroy our natural resources. I have spoken out against the construction of an expressway through Split Oak forest and have publicly opposed the same as a violation of law and the trust of Central Florida voters and would continue to oppose the project. Furthermore, there was a recent, little-understood plan to sell off a portion of Hal Scott Regional Preserve that was temporarily halted, further highlighting the need for vigilance in preserving these resources.

18. Contributions are typically linked to poor environmental policies being passed. Are you pledging to stay away from any particular contributions?

Although I do not anticipate receiving any such contribution, I would refuse any contribution from the NRA or a “gun rights” organization as I fundamentally disagree with their advocacy.

19. Understanding our economic position, how do you plan to localize and strengthen our food system?

At a state level, the state could strengthen and support a more localized food system through funding priorities. As stated previously, I support urban farming and I strongly believe that such programs encourage children to learn important skills related to growing food. To that end, I would seek state funding for 4-H programs, which were previously vetoed by Governor DeSantis. I would further support legislation that would encourage schools to increase agricultural understanding and aptitude. As I would support state funding of county soil and water conservation districts which could be used to encourage efficient use of land and urban agriculture (as is their intended purpose). The state could also help fund or encourage agricultural extensions to encourage the use of home gardening.