



ENDORSEMENT QUESTIONNAIRE 2022

Jennifer “Rita” Harris

**Running for
Florida House of Representatives
District 44**

Candidate Information

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1. What motivated you to run for this position?

During my time as vice-chair of the Orange County Democrats, Chair Wes Hodge and I took many trips up to Tallahassee to support our Democrats in the legislature and also speak at various committee hearings, and I believe it was those trips up there that were the catalysts for making me finally stop the "I can't do it" and jump feet first. I've always had a servant's heart and a desire to make this world better than I've found it, but I never believed I had the tools to do it. The years of advocacy and activism, along with the experience of being involved in the local Democratic Committees, Clubs, and Caucuses, gave me the confidence I needed to take that step. I see the potential this state has and I want to push it to live up to it, for all of us. We deserve so much better.

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

I don't believe that allies can define themselves as such. It's up to the community to tell us what we need to do to champion you and fight alongside you. I have been told that being an ally means amplifying and uplifting the voices of the LGBTQ+ community, especially those who intersect with other historically excluded communities, being willing to fight alongside the community, and also calling out transphobia and homophobia, within our own friends and family. Most of all, it means unpacking years-long programming and being willing to be better.

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

I've always been supportive of the community, even in High School, and while I've never been asked to join any official boards or non-profits, I've donated my money and my time to these institutions when asked. I would be honored if any of the great organizations in Orange County asked me to join their board. I am a proud member of the Orange County Rainbow Democrats.

- 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've mostly worked in the Orange County Democratic Executive Committee to elect strong Democrats who will push back against bills that will be harmful to the community, as well as champion legislation that will keep members of the community safe with the opportunity to thrive. I've also supported organizations like The Center and Come out with Pride with financial donations and other types of donations. I consider these places, especially The Center, close to my heart because the work they do is valuable in keeping people safe and healthy.

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?**

As elected servants, we are also leaders. I believe it's important for us to use that role of leadership to be an example. When our elected servants are inclusive, and I mean truly inclusive, I'm not talking about hiring someone for the sake of hiring someone to check a box, but when they are inclusive, the community follows suit. It's important for those who hold elected positions to be very vocal that discrimination and violence have no place in Orange County and won't be tolerated. I think we can quantitatively measure acts of violence and discrimination by reviewing complaints and police reports. I can't think of anything more sacred than being chosen, by people in your community, to represent them and it's our duty to make sure that when we go to Tallahassee they are heard, but it's also important that we bold in our unwillingness to accept hatred here. It's not enough to be tolerant, we must be unapologetic.

- 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?**

You're right. Many elected officials and staff are under-educated on the transgender community and their needs. I think it's essential that there are elected officials from the Trans community, and more staffers and aides should be trans. When we think of diversity, we too often leave that out of the equation. It's a shame there is only one trans person who works in Tallahassee. Short of that, I believe that being involved in the community, having friends/loved ones/family in the community, and leading from a place of empathy can make a tremendous improvement. As an elected servant, you have to be open to hearing the needs of your constituents, and you can't listen to them if you don't go to where they are.

- 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?**

I would tell them that I completely understand because I have a child, too, and I know the first instinct is to protect our children, even if that means picking up and moving to a different place. I know that transphobia/homophobia exists everywhere; therefore, there are no safe places, but there are places where the legislature isn't actively harming people in these communities. So I would say to them that I will do whatever tools in the toolbox to keep them safe and let them know that their presence here in Florida is valued and that most people are with them. But, in good faith, I can't beg them to stay because I understand how dangerous it is for them.

- 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?**

I will earmark funds to go into suicide prevention, including increasing mental health and family counseling for those who need it. I will fight to ensure that we can enforce conversion therapy bans, as we know that conversion therapy has a harmful effect on people. As a community servant and elected official, I will lead by example, and ensure the LGBTQIA+ community knows that they are welcome and embraced. I will work tirelessly to combat any anti-LBQTIA+ legislation that may be proposed.

- 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 a state legislator, I will repeal any laws that prevent transgender and non-binary students from having access to gender-affirming healthcare. I will repeal bans on transgender and non-binary students being banned from playing sports or using the bathroom that matches their gender. Furthermore, I will appropriate funding to schools to increase resources for transgender and non-binary students, including mental health access at school if they cannot receive it at home. I will also strengthen GSA's and propose funding for a Trans Student Alliance, which will enable trans and non-binary students to feel welcome and have a community in the school. We all know how challenging school can be, especially during middle and high school. We must do work to make these spaces safer. When we make them safer for Trans/Non-Binary students, we make them safer for all students.

- 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 do not support book bans and will repeal 1467. It's crucial that students access material that entertains, provokes thoughts and acts as a window or a mirror where they can see other people or see themselves. Unfortunately, our schools are underfunded, in general. As State Rep, I will work to ensure that schools have more funding, including the resources to buy more books for their students.

- 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?**

It's incorrect to refer to it as a lifestyle or a choice, as it's neither. It's just the way someone is born. I would explain trans and non-binary people don't choose to be trans in the same way that cis people don't choose to be cis.

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?

I would speak up before it got to the point where the woman left in tears. While, I think all people should listen to a targeted community, in this example, a trans woman; it's unfortunate, that oftentimes, it also takes other cis people to call out transphobia. I would call out the board chair for not using the woman's pronouns. I would also work to see that the chair was removed. No one who is transphobic should be in power.

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 explain to her that teachers aren't encouraging their students to be anything other than who they are. I would remind her that she loves her son because he is bright, intelligent, and compassionate and direct her to resources so she can read about how to support her son more fully.

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?

As someone who lived in Phoenix, I'm concerned about the outward sprawl and its impact on areas, including the possibility of increasing the chance of flooding. I live right near the Sun Rail and like that they are building up the areas by the train to increase ridership. I will ensure that the development is smart and doesn't keep pushing into forested areas.

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 support the idea of constructing more multi-family homes in the neighborhoods like mine. However, it must be done with an increase in public transit for community members to support it. As a state rep, I will work to educate my constituents about why multi-family homes with mixed use are good for our communities and why creating neighborhoods that encourage walking and biking will help decrease car usage as well as having communities near the Sun Rail will promote ridership.

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 believe that we must move away from lawns and towards sustainable options for the environment. I think it's actually cheaper to maintain these types of lawns, and instead of having houses where lawns are dying or dry because homeowners can't afford watering or the cost of replacement, we would have lush native plants.

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?

The top environmental concern is Shingle Creek. The headwaters to the Everglades is in District 44. There is concern about stormwater and its contents being drained into the creek and heading south towards Lake Okeechobee. Shingle Creek is considered a biodiversity hotspot. We must work to protect the area and also decrease the use of pesticides and fertilizers that are drained into Shingle Creek and make their way down the Florida chain of lakes to the Everglades. As a State Rep, I will earmark money to ensure that Shingle Creek remains protected.

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

I won't take money from FPL or sugar companies. I'm also vowing not to take any funding from the major theme parks in the area.

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

I would appropriate funding for urban/community gardens so residents can apply for grants to get started. In addition, I will sponsor/cosponsor legislation that broadens tax breaks for backyard farmers and offer grants and initiatives for backyard farmers to create a grower's co-ops. Also, appropriating funds to get farmers' markets into more neighborhoods with the focus not just on crafters but food growers.