

County Court Judge

Candidate (Group 1) Questions – 2024

Name: **Kathryn Wallace** Date: July 12, 2024

What do you believe distinguishes an exceptional judge, and how do your qualifications align with those standards?

Exceptional judges possess extensive legal knowledge, a deep understanding of their community, and the character to treat all individuals with respect. Citizens should feel heard, receive due process, and be assured of fair rulings based on the laws enacted by the Florida legislature and the US and Florida Constitutions.

With nearly 17 years of legal experience in Charlotte County, my career began as a prosecutor, handling thousands of misdemeanors and felonies, specializing in economic crimes and DUI manslaughter cases. I managed the Mental Health and Drug Court dockets for four years. In seven years of private practice, I represented hundreds of clients in Dependency, Family, Traffic, and Criminal courts, participating in motion hearings and trials daily.

A pivotal period of my career was my six years as Senior Staff Attorney for Charlotte County's seven judges. This role provided a neutral perspective on court proceedings, where I advised the courts based on Florida statutes and case law. While lawyers might encounter new issues sporadically, I addressed every lawyer's novel issue, drafting over 1,500 orders annually. This role honed my ability to adapt to various legal areas as docket assignments changed. I gained insights into the management skills judges need to run efficient dockets and fostered strong relationships with the clerk's office, court administration, and local law enforcement.

I have served the community on the boards of the United Way of Charlotte County and the Center for Abuse and Rape Emergencies, among others. I have coached Girls on the Run for nine seasons, graduated from Leadership Charlotte-Go Green, and am an active Rotarian in District 6960. Currently, I serve as President of the local Bar Association and have co-chaired the annual county High School Mock Trial Program for six years. These roles have deepened my understanding of available community services. My extensive experience qualifies me for the position of Charlotte County Judge.

How do you plan to ensure fairness and impartiality in your decisions while serving as a judge in Charlotte County?

Fairness and impartiality are critical to ensuring that the citizens have faith and confidence in the courts. In order to be fair and impartial I follow several principles.

The first is to make sure that all decisions are grounded in the law and that similar cases are treated in a similar manner. Judges must show unbiased decision making by remaining independent, free from outside influence, public opinion, or personal relationships. If there is a conflict of interest, then I would recuse myself from hearing the matter.

Most importantly I will come to the courtroom everyday ready and willing to listen with an open mind to the facts and evidence that are provided in court. Each litigant will be provided the opportunity to be heard, to present their witnesses, evidence, and argument and my decisions will be made solely on the evidence presented and the relevant law.

One of the ways to help the public feel confident that I have been fair and impartial is to have defined procedures and clearly explain decisions to the litigants. Procedures should be clear to ensure that all parties regardless of financial ability have an understanding of the process and their rights within that process.

Court proceedings will continue to be open to the public and decisions will therefore continue to be reviewed by the public. Further, all decisions remain subject to an appeals process in order to make sure that they were fair and correct.

Lastly, I will continue to learn through ongoing legal education and ethics training and reflect on decisions in order to continue to hone my skills.

What initiatives or reforms do you propose to enhance access to justice and improve the efficiency of the judicial process in our community?

One of the persistent challenges in Charlotte County is the lack of public transportation, exacerbated by the county's size and the distance between West County and the Justice Center in Punta Gorda. There are sufficient facilities and personnel available within West County to be able to address civil traffic infractions as well as small claim cases. I would advocate for holding court proceedings in West County.

Two years ago, the Florida Supreme Court revised procedures to permit remote participation in various proceedings at the court's discretion. Despite the utility of Zoom, certain proceedings, such as criminal and civil jury trials, are best conducted in person. In-person trials ensure litigants are heard and that jurors and the court focus uninterrupted on the issues. When appropriate, I would expand the use of remote proceedings, as allowed by the Florida Supreme Court, so that litigants can more easily attend without losing work.

Regarding case filing access, parties, whether self-represented or with counsel, can designate email addresses for service of court documents and notices, and e-file pleadings, eliminating the need to visit the courthouse or endure the expense and delay of mailing documents.

The county's law library provides access to online case law research and form documents. I would collaborate with the Charlotte County Bar Association and the Clerk's Office to expand the resources available within the law library to litigants representing themselves including access to self-help instructions and a list of attorneys willing to provide free consultations.

Lastly, efficient docket management and availability for hearings are crucial for access to justice. I will effectively manage my dockets to keep hearing times available so that parties do not need to wait 30 days or longer for simple matters to be heard.

Please answer each question in 300 words or less and email back to bwhite@charlottecountychamber.org on or before July 12, 2024.



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Chamber of Commerce**