RICHLANDS, VIRGINIA

CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE

10 questions for Town candidates

Research verified September 30, 2026

Issued by Catalyst Civic

CANDIDATE NAME	Nicole Helbett
OFFICE SOUGHT	Mayor
DATE COMPLETED	10/22/26

The questions are deliberately difficult. The factual premises are sourced; the policy judgments belong to the candidate.

HOW TO USE THIS QUESTIONNAIRE

PURPOSE

Every candidate should receive the same factual questions. The questionnaire does not assume one policy answer is correct; it asks candidates to state positions, thresholds, targets, timelines, and the evidence they would require before acting.

CITATION METHOD

Factual premises use true superscript Word footnotes. Footnotes are written in APA-style source form, and a consolidated APA-style reference list appears at the end.

RESEARCH STANDARD

Primary government records were preferred where available. Census counts, estimates, proposed plans, adopted rates, attributed statements, and derived arithmetic are labeled so that unlike categories are not quietly treated as the same thing.

CANDIDATE RESPONSES

Answer the question asked. Where a number, target, or deadline is requested, state it clearly in your answer. If you dispute a factual premise, identify the specific fact you dispute and provide the source you believe should replace it.

PUBLICATION

If responses are published, candidates should be given the same deadline, the same word or page allowance, and the same opportunity to correct transcription or formatting errors. Answers should not be substantively edited without the candidate's approval.

RETURNING THIS QUESTIONNAIRE

This questionnaire is sent by Catalyst Civic to every candidate for Richlands Town office. Every candidate receives the same questions, the same deadline, and the same word limit.

Return by: Tuesday, October 27, 2026 Return to: Catalyst Civic, admin@catalystcivic.org

Please keep each answer to 250 words or fewer. Answers longer than that may be shortened only with your approval.

FACT-CHECKING CONVENTIONS

- The May 2026 five-year rate schedule is labeled PROPOSED because the located source itself calls it a Proposed Five-Year Rate Plan.
- The 2010-to-2025 population decline is labeled approximate because it compares a decennial Census count with a later population estimate.
- Countywide tourism figures are not presented as Richlands-only results.
- Generator figures from different dates are presented as dated snapshots or potentially different scopes rather than silently merged into one current number.
- Questions without a Verified Record box ask for a position only and make no factual claim.

GOVERNANCE

1. Council debate rules and the rights of every member

VERIFIED RECORD

On September 8, 2026, Richlands Town Council voted 4-2 to limit council members to two comments or questions per agenda item. WVVA reported that Mayor Rod Cury does not vote unless there is a tie. [1]

QUESTION

Would you keep, change, or repeal the rule limiting each council member to two comments or questions per agenda item? State the exact rule you would support. Then name the written protections, if any, that every member should have no matter who holds the majority, such as receiving supporting documents in advance, placing items on the agenda, or offering amendments.

CANDIDATE ANSWER

Type your answer here.

I would change the rule limiting council members to two comments or questions per agenda item. Meaningful debate, thoughtful questions, and public accountability should never be restricted simply because a discussion becomes uncomfortable or takes longer than expected. Council members have a responsibility to understand the issues before making decisions that affect residents. I would support reasonable rules that keep meetings organized, prevent repetitive arguments, and ensure everyone has an opportunity to speak. However, members should be allowed additional questions or comments when new information arises or clarification is necessary. I would also support written protections that apply equally to every council member, regardless of who holds the majority. These protections should include timely access to supporting documents before votes, a fair process for requesting items be placed on the agenda, and the ability to propose amendments to pending motions. The mayor should facilitate meetings fairly, not use procedural rules to silence disagreement. A council that respectfully challenges ideas and examines the facts makes better decisions than one where members feel pressured to remain quiet. Richlands residents deserve a government where decisions are discussed openly, questions are welcomed, and every elected representative has a fair opportunity to fulfill their duties. Transparency and accountability must apply to everyone, not just those who agree with the majority.

[1]Christian, M. (2026, September 9). Richlands Town Council limits member comments. WVVA. https://www.wvva.com/2026/09/10/richlands-town-council-limits-member-comments/

GOVERNANCE

2. Audits and financial reporting

VERIFIED RECORD

Virginia law requires qualifying localities to submit annual transmittal data and an audited financial report to the Auditor of Public Accounts by December 15. Richlands had not submitted its FY2025 materials when the APA published its report on April 26, 2026; the APA later reported that Richlands had submitted both items by September 11, 2026. [2]

QUESTION

What deadline should Richlands set for finishing and publishing its annual audit, ahead of the state's December 15 deadline? Give a date. Would you require financial reports to council monthly or quarterly? If a deadline is missed, what should happen automatically?

CANDIDATE ANSWER

Type your answer here.

I would establish December 1st as Richlands' target deadline for completing and publishing the annual audit, giving the town two weeks before the state's December 15th deadline to address any remaining issues. The goal should be to consistently meet state requirements early not scramble to meet them at the last minute.I would require financial reports to be provided to council monthly, including revenue, expenditures, outstanding obligations, utility finances, and comparisons between the approved budget and actual spending. Residents deserve accessible, understandable financial information, and council members need timely reports to make informed decisions. If the audit deadline is missed, the town should be required to provide council and the public with a written explanation identifying the cause, the responsible department, the corrective actions being taken, and a firm completion date. Council should receive regular progress updates until the audit is complete. Any legally required state notifications must also be made on time. I would work with the town manager, finance staff, and independent auditors to identify problems early and establish a reliable reporting calendar. If staffing, accounting systems, or other resources are contributing to delays, those issues should be addressed directly. Financial transparency is not optional. Taxpayers deserve to know how their money is being managed and council should never have to rely on incomplete information when making decisions that affect the town's finances.

[2]Auditor of Public Accounts, Commonwealth of Virginia. (2026, April 26; updated September 11, 2026). 2025 Comparative Report of Local Government Revenues and Expenditures. https://apa.virginia.gov/local-government/reports/comparative-reports/23740

GOVERNANCE

3. Hiring and overseeing the Town Manager

QUESTION

The Town Manager runs day-to-day operations and answers to council. What qualifications and experience would you require in a permanent Town Manager? How should council evaluate the manager's performance each year, and should a summary of that evaluation be made public? Name the first three goals you would want council to set for the manager.

CANDIDATE ANSWER

Type your answer here.

I would seek a Town Manager with proven experience in municipal government, financial management, budgeting, personnel leadership, infrastructure planning, and public administration. The ideal candidate must demonstrate integrity, transparency, sound judgment, and a willingness to work collaboratively with council while serving the best interests of Richlands residents. Qualifications should be evaluated through a fair, competitive hiring process based on experience, education, and demonstrated results. I would support an annual performance evaluation using clearly established, measurable goals adopted by council. The evaluation should consider financial management, completion of projects, infrastructure maintenance, compliance with laws and policies, employee management, responsiveness to residents, and progress toward council's priorities. Council members should have an opportunity to provide documented feedback, and the manager should have an opportunity to respond. A public summary of the evaluation should be published to the extent permitted by Virginia law, protecting confidential personnel information while allowing residents to understand whether established goals are being met. The first three goals I would want council to establish are:

Financial transparency: Provide timely, accurate financial reports and maintain a clear plan for completing required audits and addressing financial concerns.

Infrastructure and maintenance: Develop a prioritized plan for roads, drainage, water and sewer systems, and other essential town services, with realistic timelines and budget estimates.

Public accountability: Establish consistent communication with residents, respond to concerns in a timely manner, and provide regular progress updates on council priorities.

The Town Manager should be accountable to council and the public with performance measured by results not promises.

ECONOMY

4. Population and jobs: a 2030 target

VERIFIED RECORD

The 2010 Census counted 5,823 residents in Richlands. The 2020 Census counted 5,261, and the Census Bureau estimated 5,051 residents on July 1, 2025. Comparing the 2010 count with the 2025 estimate yields an approximate decline of 772 people, or 13.3%. [3]

QUESTION

What population should Richlands aim for in 2030? Give a number. Name the two actions within Town government's actual authority that would do the most to keep or attract residents and jobs, and say how residents could measure whether they worked.

CANDIDATE ANSWER

Type your answer here.

I believe Richlands should aim for a population of 5,500 residents by 2030, focusing on reversing population decline through economic opportunity, community investment, and making our town a place where families want to stay and businesses want to grow. This is an ambitious but measurable goal and we must be honest about progress along the way. The first action would be to establish a business retention and recruitment initiative. Town government should identify vacant commercial properties, work with property owners to encourage redevelopment, streamline communication with prospective businesses, and connect entrepreneurs with available resources. Success would be measured by the number of businesses opened or retained, jobs created, commercial properties occupied, and private investment brought into town. The second action would be to develop a public infrastructure and quality of life improvement plan. This would prioritize drainage, roads, essential utilities, public spaces, and neglected properties while identifying grants and partnerships that reduce the burden on local taxpayers. Residents and potential employers need confidence that Richlands is investing in its future.
I would publish an annual progress report showing population estimates, business openings and closures, employment opportunities, building permits, and progress on infrastructure projects. These numbers would help us determine what is working and where we need to adjust our approach.
Town government cannot control every factor that influences population, but it can create conditions that encourage people to invest, work, raise families, and build their future here.

[3]U.S. Census Bureau. (n.d.). QuickFacts: Richlands town, Virginia. Retrieved September 30, 2026, from https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/richlandstownvirginia/VET605224. Calculation note: (5,823 - 5,051) / 5,823 = approximately 13.3%; this compares a decennial Census count with a later population estimate and is therefore labeled approximate.

TOURISM

5. Tourism that shows up in Richlands

VERIFIED RECORD

Tazewell County's May 2026 proposed FY2027 budget summary lists an adopted FY2026 Tourism Department budget of $272,251. The same document reports FY2025 actual county transient-occupancy-tax revenue of $287,065. These are countywide figures, not Richlands-only figures. [4]

QUESTION

County tourism figures cover all of Tazewell County, not Richlands alone. Name one or two measures Richlands should use to show whether tourism is bringing visitors and spending into town, such as lodging nights, lodging-tax collections, event attendance, or trail counts, and give a four-year target for each. What should Richlands ask the county's tourism effort to deliver for the town, and how would you report the results to residents each year?

CANDIDATE ANSWER

Type your answer here.

Richlands should measure tourism by looking at what visitors actually bring to our town, not relying solely on countywide tourism statistics. Two useful measures would be local lodging activity and visitor spending at Richlands businesses. Where reliable data is available, we should also track attendance at local events and participation in outdoor recreation. First, I would work with local lodging providers to collect quarterly information on occupancy, lodging activity, and visitor origins while protecting private business information. Second, I would partner with local businesses and event organizers to measure visitor participation, event attendance, and spending through voluntary surveys and other practical reporting methods. I would also support promoting the ATV trail in Doran as an opportunity to bring more visitors into our area. Outdoor recreation can encourage riders and their families to visit local restaurants, gas stations, shops, and lodging businesses. Richlands should work with Tazewell County, trail organizers, and neighboring communities to promote the trail, develop visitor information, and encourage riders to spend money locally. We should also evaluate opportunities to connect trail visitors with other attractions and businesses throughout the area. I would support a four year goal of increasing measurable visitor activity and visitor spending in Richlands by 20% from an established baseline. The first year should establish reliable data so progress can be measured fairly rather than relying on guesses. Richlands should coordinate with Tazewell County’s tourism efforts while making sure our town’s individual results are identified separately whenever possible. Countywide revenue figures should not automatically be presented as Richlands specific success. Each year, I would ask the town to publish a public tourism report showing visitor activity, local business participation, money invested in tourism initiatives, and measurable results. Residents deserve to know whether tourism efforts are generating business for our community and producing meaningful returns.

[4]Tazewell County Board of Supervisors. (2026, May 13). Proposed operating budget, fiscal year 2026-2027 [Budget summary, pp. 2, 5]. https://tazewellcountyva.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/Proposed-FY2027-Budget-Summary.pdf

INFRASTRUCTURE

6. Wastewater: what was cut, and what it costs

VERIFIED RECORD

A February 10, 2026 Town council packet states that a July 2025 amendment to the wastewater treatment plant Preliminary Engineering Report reduced the scope of the original project "to meet available funding limits" and that VDEQ approved the changed scope, drawings, and contract documents. [5]

QUESTION

Would you require the Town to publish a list of the wastewater work that was removed or deferred, with an estimated cost and planned completion year for each item, along with a current statement of the project's debt? By what date? What would you need to see before supporting any new utility borrowing?

CANDIDATE ANSWER

Type your answer here.

Yes. I would require the Town of Richlands to publish a detailed accounting of the wastewater treatment plant project, including all work removed or deferred from the original scope, the estimated cost of each item, the reason for the change, and a projected completion date. I would set a deadline of 60 days after taking office for this information to be compiled and made available to council and the public.
The report should also include the project’s current total cost, expenditures to date, outstanding obligations, remaining debt, funding sources, and any anticipated additional borrowing. Residents deserve to understand what changed, why it changed, and what those changes mean for the town’s finances and future utility rates.Before supporting any new utility borrowing, I would require a complete financial review that includes an independent assessment of the project’s current status, remaining construction costs, available grant funding, debt obligations, and projected effects on water and sewer rates. Council should also receive an explanation of any alternatives considered and why the proposed financing is the most responsible option. I would not support borrowing simply to move a project forward without first understanding the full financial impact on residents.
However, I also recognize that wastewater infrastructure is essential to public health, regulatory compliance, and the town’s future growth. Delaying necessary work can create additional costs and risks. My goal would be to make decisions based on verified financial information, engineering requirements, and the long term interests of Richlands residents. Taxpayers deserve transparency, responsible planning, and a clear explanation before the town takes on additional debt.

[5]Town of Richlands. (2026, February 10). Council packet: Task Order No. 4, Wastewater Treatment Plant Upgrades Construction Phase Services. https://www.town.richlands.va.us/agenda/2026/CP%20Feb%2010%2C%202026.pdf

INFRASTRUCTURE

7. Flooding and stormwater

QUESTION

What would you do about flooding and stormwater drainage in Richlands? Name the first area or problem you would address, how you would pay for it (Town funds, state or federal grants, or other sources), and what result residents should expect within four years.

CANDIDATE ANSWER

Type your answer here.

Flooding and stormwater drainage must be a priority for Richlands because these problems affect residents' safety, property, roads, and quality of life. My first step would be to work with town staff to identify the areas experiencing the most frequent flooding, the greatest property damage, and the most serious drainage failures. I would prioritize the locations posing the greatest risk to residents and infrastructure rather than making decisions based on visibility or politics.The first year would focus on a documented assessment of problem areas, including inspections of storm drains, ditches,

UTILITY RATES & HOUSEHOLD AFFORDABILITY

8. Rate increases and what households can afford

VERIFIED RECORD

Using only the listed components in the Town's proposed FY2026 and FY2027 rate schedule, an illustrative household using 1,000 kWh of electricity and 4,000 gallons of water/sewer per month would see an increase of about $80.69 per month, or $968.28 per year. Census QuickFacts reports Richlands median household income at $37,154 for 2020-2024. The illustration is not a full bill estimate: it excludes taxes, PCA/base-rate factors, minimum charges, other fees, and differences in actual household usage. [6]

QUESTION

Would you approve the proposed FY2027 rate increases as written, change them, or reject them? Answer for electric, water, sewer, and trash. What monthly bill increase would you consider too much for a typical Richlands household, and what would you do instead: phase it in, offer assistance, cut costs, or something else?

CANDIDATE ANSWER

Type your answer here.

I would not approve the proposed rate increases without first reviewing the financial assumptions, the town’s current obligations, and the impact on residents. I recognize that electricity, water, sewer, and trash services have real operating costs, but families are already struggling with the cost of living. Rate decisions must be based on transparent financial information, responsible planning, and a clear explanation of why increases are necessary. The questionnaire estimates

[6]Town of Richlands. (2026, May). Proposed five-year rate plan. https://www.town.richlands.va.us/announcement/Public%20Notices/Five%20Year%20Rate%20Plan.pdf; U.S. Census Bureau. (n.d.). QuickFacts: Richlands town, Virginia. Retrieved September 30, 2026, from https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/richlandstownvirginia/VET605224. Calculation: electric energy +$61.27, electric customer charge +$1.10, water +$3.64, sewer +$13.68, trash +$1.00 = $80.69/month; x12 = $968.28/year. This is an illustration using stated usage, not an average bill.

NATURAL-GAS GENERATOR PROJECT

9. The generator: cost, risk, and a pass/fail test

VERIFIED RECORD

A July 1, 2025 Town financial presentation used a projected total generator-project cost of $16.3 million. A July 27, 2026 WVVA video headline described Richlands as moving forward with a "$14M generator." Those figures may use different scopes or points in time; this questionnaire does not assume either headline figure is the current all-in cost. [7]

QUESTION

Would you require the Town to publish, by a date you name, the generator's current total cost, the cash and debt already committed, which grants have been received and which are still expected, and the cost to finish? What is the most total cost you would accept, and what would you do if the project costs more or saves less than promised?

CANDIDATE ANSWER

Type your answer here.

I would require the Town of Richlands to publish a complete, itemized financial report on the natural gas generator project within 60 days of taking office**.** Residents deserve to know the project's actual cost, not just an initial estimate or a headline figure. The report should identify the total projected cost, money already spent, existing debt and financial commitments, grants received, grants still pending, remaining costs, and the anticipated funding sources. It should also explain the assumptions behind the projected savings, including how those savings were calculated and when the town expects the investment to begin paying off. I would not establish an arbitrary acceptable cost ceiling before reviewing the contracts, financing agreements, and engineering information. However, I would require a clearly documented total project budget and a public explanation of the maximum expected financial exposure to taxpayers and utility customers. If costs exceed the approved budget or projected savings fall short, I would expect the town manager to provide council with a written explanation, updated financial projections, and alternatives before additional discretionary spending or commitments

[7] Town of Richlands. (2025, July 1). Special called meeting: Electric Fund and generator project financial presentation. https://www.town.richlands.va.us/minutes/Council/2025/SCM%20July%201%2C%202025.pdf; WVVA. (2026, July 27). Richlands moves forward with $14M generator to cut power costs [Video]. https://www.wvva.com/video/2026/07/27/richlands-moves-forward-with-14m-generator-cut-power-costs/

COMMUNITY

10. Public safety, drugs, and blighted property

QUESTION

Which of these would be your top priority: police and public safety, drug addiction and recovery, or abandoned and blighted property? Name one specific action the Town can take on it, where the money would come from, and how residents would know within two years whether it is working.

CANDIDATE ANSWER

Type your answer here.

My top priority would be drug addiction and recovery, while recognizing that public safety and blighted property are closely connected to the overall health of our community. Addiction affects families across Richlands, and addressing it requires more than arrests alone. We need accountability, prevention, treatment, and opportunities for people to rebuild their lives. One specific action I would take is to establish a coordinated community recovery initiative that brings together law enforcement, local recovery organizations, healthcare providers, community groups, and existing treatment programs. The town should identify available resources, improve referrals to treatment, connect individuals with recovery support, and work with property owners and appropriate agencies to address locations where drug activity and neglected properties create ongoing safety concerns. I would begin by reviewing existing programs and identifying funding opportunities through applicable state and federal grants, regional partnerships, and community organizations. Any town funding would need to be evaluated through the budget process, with clear goals and public accountability. Richlands should pursue outside funding whenever possible rather than placing unnecessary additional burdens on taxpayers. Within two years residents should be able to see measurable results through an annual public report tracking referrals to treatment, participation in recovery programs, repeat complaints at identified problem locations, and progress addressing blighted properties. Personal health information must remain confidential, and results should be evaluated fairly rather than relying on arrest numbers alone. Recovery is not an excuse for criminal behavior, and public safety must remain a priority. However, we cannot arrest our way out of addiction. Richlands needs a practical, compassionate, and accountable approach that protects residents while giving people a meaningful opportunity to recover and contribute to our community.

REFERENCES

APA-style consolidated source list. Footnotes on each question identify the source(s) for that question.

Auditor of Public Accounts, Commonwealth of Virginia. (2026, April 26; updated September 11, 2026). 2025 Comparative Report of Local Government Revenues and Expenditures. https://apa.virginia.gov/local-government/reports/comparative-reports/23740

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WVVA. (2026, July 27). Richlands moves forward with $14M generator to cut power costs [Video]. https://www.wvva.com/video/2026/07/27/richlands-moves-forward-with-14m-generator-cut-power-costs/