

2025 Lake Wales Mayor Candidates

Questions were given to both candidates on February 17, 2025. Both candidates responded no later than February 26, 2025. This document was produced March 1, 2025.

1. Why are you running for Mayor in 2025? What sets you apart from your opponent? Where can people get more information about your campaign and your background?

Curtis Gibson



2025 marks a transformative year, particularly in this mayoral race, which is a pivotal election with far-reaching implications. I firmly believe in our community and city, and I am committed to active engagement, refusing to let special interests dictate our government. My aspiration is to serve as a mayor who represents the entire community, fostering an environment of professional respect for diverse opinions. I aim to implement initiatives that benefit our community in a prudent and manageable manner. My opponent and I exhibit distinct differences, as he cater to special interests, whereas my campaign is supported by average citizens. A closer examination of my opponent's campaign finance report reveals the driving forces behind their candidacy. For further information about my platform, I invite you to visit my website at votegibsonformayor.com.

Jack Hilligoss



- I am running for Mayor because I care deeply about my city. Change is coming at us at a rapid pace bringing incredible opportunities and potential problems. The leadership of our city is more critical now than it has ever been.
- The primary thing that sets me apart from Mr. Gibson that I am willing to comment on is demonstrated, leadership, competence. In the three decades I have led a church that has grown from less than 100 members to a congregation of nearly 2000 constituents, from two staff members to dozens, and from being nearly insolvent to solid, financial footing. In that time, we have launched a successful school, multiple NPO's, and helped launch an effective, residential, addiction ministry. We successfully relocated to a new facility in a multi-million dollar campaign that left a great, special needs, school in the heart of Lake Wales. And, for the last three years I have served as the Mayor of Lake Wales during its most extensive and effective renovation in decades. That leadership experience sets me apart from Mr. Gibson.
- Best place to begin is on my Facebook Page-Jack Hilligoss for Mayor

2. Citizen Concerns – What do you believe are the top three concerns for most Lake Wales residents, and how do you plan to address these concerns?

Curtis Gibson



The top three concerns in Lake Wales are managing growth, ensuring adequate water supply, and addressing transportation issues. Leveraging my expertise and experience as a former city commissioner, I will ensure that low-cost feasibility studies are conducted to inform a comprehensive plan that addresses citizens' concerns. This plan will manage growth by requiring developers to adhere to our plan and pay impact fees. If developers are unwilling to comply, they will not be permitted to operate in our community. I will also facilitate Lake Wales' re-entry into the Polk cooperative water group comprising nearby municipalities, which will enable us to ensure adequate water supply for future development and our citizens. Regarding transportation, I am deeply concerned about the frequent landing of medical helicopters on my property at Eagle Ridge Mall due to accidents. This highlights the pressing issue of congestion in our community. To address this, I am committed to collaborating with county, state, and federal agencies to develop a plan that informs our decision-making and supports future growth. This effort will commence with our developers, ensuring they design and construct adequate turning lanes to prevent traffic congestion. These measures represent just the beginning of my proactive approach to solving problems and implementing solutions.

Jack Hilligoss



- Managing the rapid growth well
- Developing Infrastructure and managing natural resources
- Economic Development and quality of life

The remaining questions are about these concerns so I will address them there.

3. Managing Growth – With rapid growth continuing in the Lake Wales area, how should the city balance economic development, infrastructure, and environmental concerns while supporting local businesses?

Curtis Gibson



Polk County is experiencing the most rapid growth of any county in the United States of America. Currently, Lake Wales is at the forefront of this growth, and while it cannot be halted, it can be managed effectively. To achieve this, it is essential that we adhere to our plan, avoiding urban sprawl and ensuring that the influx of new homes in Lake Wales is accompanied by the introduction of businesses that offer well-paying job opportunities. Notably, many individuals relocating to our area are professionals who work in major cities such as Orlando, and Tampa, but prefer not to reside there. Therefore, it is crucial that we prioritize environmental protection, as this is a key aspect of Lake Wales' charm, with its rich history, picturesque landscapes, and abundant natural beauty. Our goal is to preserve the character of our small town. As we navigate this period of growth, the election of a new mayor is forthcoming, and I am hopeful that I can earn your vote.

Jack Hilligoss



The key word in this question is “balance”. Each one of these concerns is valid, none can be neglected, and steps are being taken at all times to address each one. Here are the steps we have taken under each heading:

Economic development- We completed an award-winning land use study that highlighted what sorts of business we should pursue and how we should designate land uses for those sorts of businesses. This will serve as a guide in future annexation and zoning decisions. We completed an Economic Development Plan with the Central Polk Development Council providing us guidance on recruiting businesses and building a ready, local, workforce. We partnered with Retail Strategies, a company that helped us prepare a recruitment strategy to attract businesses, jobs to our area. We adopted impact fee mitigation policies for companies who will commit to making large, capital, investments in our city and will provide a certain number of higher paying jobs.

Infrastructure- When a candidate, speaks of “building infrastructure” they tend to focus very narrowly on “roads” because it plays to traffic frustrations of potential voters. However, roads represent a small slice of infrastructure issues. In fact, it represents the smallest slice that the city government has any control over. Here are the ways we have and will continue to address infrastructure:

- We have fully funded the city's street resurfacing priorities for the last two years. First time that has happened in a long time. We have resurfaced miles of city streets in 2023-24
- We have replaced miles of outdated sewer/water lines in Northwest Lake Wales and along Buckmoore Road
- We have required every new developer to submit plans that creates an interconnected, local, street grid making it more convenient for local drivers to get around town without having to access major, state, highways
- We installed high-speed, internet, cable throughout the city
- We built out Park Ave. Connector Trail and have grant funding for Tower Blvd. Trail and Kiwanis Loop Trail. These are the first steps of connecting our local trails to county and state trails-again, encouraging and enabling multiple forms of safe travel
- We did lighting assessments throughout the downtown and repaired or replaced lighting
- We launched, and will complete this year, a large sidewalk and landscaping project in the Northwest
- We have extended runways and taxi lanes, modernized the full farm, and upgraded all security at our airport

Environmental Concerns- The Lake Wales Envisioned Plan prioritizes the creation of large green spaces around our city. We have recently seen a private land owner commit a large portion of their land for preservation. Our consultant in the plan admitted this is a “moon shot” because it will require huge finances or incredible cooperation between many levels of government and private land owners. However, it is a priority I am hopeful those land owners would be open to and I would pursue with excitement. As for what we have control over, water is the biggest, immediate, concern. Lake Wales has done a good job at this. We became the first municipality in Polk County to be Five Star Water Certified when we required all new developers to use multi-water preserving steps in building. We require all new developers to install “dry lines” for irrigation so drinking water isn't used for irrigation. Lake Wales is currently, comfortably below its daily pumping capacity because of this good management.

4. City Planning & Development – What is your plan for handling growth in Lake Wales? Are there specific policies or changes to the Comprehensive Plan you would advocate for to ensure responsible development?

Curtis Gibson



It is fair to understand. The mayor holds only one vote; however, we can make our voices heard by introducing various initiatives at commission meetings to garner the support of two additional commissioners, as a majority is required to move forward with policy changes, referendums, and ordinances. This approach allows for the identification of different areas within our administration that require attention, such as planning and zoning, to ensure that our zoning plans align with our overall vision. My methodology involves consistently raising issues at commission meetings that our citizens are concerned about, and I do not shy away from this approach.

Jack Hilligoss



The Lake Wales Envisioned Plan, is the mandate and blueprint we have been given by our citizens for these issues. We have already enacted policies from it to elevate our design and build standards substantially. In late 2023 we adopted a three-tier approach to approving any new development that heavily incentivizes development according to those policies.

5. Revitalization & Infrastructure – How will you support the timely completion of downtown revitalization efforts while ensuring businesses are not negatively impacted? What other key improvements do you want to prioritize for Lake Wales?

Curtis Gibson



I believe it is crucial to acknowledge that the City of Lake Wales should not have commenced groundwork without a plan in place to mitigate the impact on downtown businesses due to the road closure. In fact, I would have proposed utilizing CRA funding to support initiatives that business owners could have applied for during the downtown revitalization, aligning with our Lake Wales Connected Plan. I have always prioritized enhancing recreational amenities in our community to improve the quality of life, as I firmly believe this is essential to attracting families to our community, which is the ultimate goal.

Jack Hilligoss



- We learned a great deal from the Park Ave./Market Plaza project. One step we have taken is to hire a Project Management firm to oversee and coordinate all future revitalization projects of this nature. Their expertise and role would be to lessen the negative impacts and delays of these necessary and exciting projects.
- I am very excited about the Proposals for our 8 city parks in the Parks and Recreation Master Plan. We must complete the remaining steps of the Lake Wales Connected Plan and have the funding to do four more streets.

6. Education & Schools – What ideas or suggestions do you have on how the Lake Wales Charter Schools and Polk County Public Schools could work together to improve education for all students? What steps would you, as a visible public figure in Lake Wales, take to support all public schools in our community?

Curtis Gibson



I'm a strong proponent of education. As a product of public school and former employee, I recognize its value. In my previous role, I endeavored to establish connections between the Polk County School Board and the Lake Wales Charter School. I firmly believe that fostering relationships between our school board representative and the charter system is crucial for our community. By establishing a partnership, we can facilitate collaboration and ensure a voice at the table. The City of Lake Wales can play a vital role in bridging the gap between these entities, ultimately benefiting our school system.

Jack Hilligoss



· I trust the competent leadership we have in place at both our Charter System and County System to figure out their working relationships and improve education. I wouldn't deign to tell them how to do that but I offer my full support, I try to appear and aid in any way they need me, we as a Commission have responded to requests for help with traffic issues, we recently approved the installation of electronic enforcement devices to enforce traffic safety around our schools, and we recently voted unanimously to forgive a large loan our Charter System owed on the historic High School building as a way of helping our schools financially.

7. Crime & Community Engagement – What specific strategies do you support to improve public safety and reduce crime in Lake Wales? How will you ensure Lake Wales remains a safe and welcoming community for all residents, regardless of background?

Curtis Gibson



I had the privilege of speaking with the Chief of Lake Wales Police Department, and based on our conversation, he explained that for the benefit of our community, we are presently partnered with the Polk County Sheriff's Department to ensure public safety. When crimes occur, Lake Wales PD and the Polk County Sheriff's Department collaborate efficiently to apprehend perpetrators and solve crimes. However, I firmly believe that community engagement with the police department outreach is essential. This allows our citizens to have a voice and ensures that our community's needs are met fairly. I was instrumental in introducing the concept of equipping all officers with cameras to promote accountability and transparency, which has proven effective. These are the types of initiatives that we need elected officials to champion, recognizing areas where they can make a positive impact by advocating for initiatives that can potentially be voted on.

Jack Hilligoss



- Making sure that our Fire and Police departments are well-funded, equipped, and supported is the best way to do this. Which, ironically, means not taking punitive positions towards growth in our city
- In the last three years we have added several police officers and fire fighters. Most of our local firefighters are EMT certified
- We added our first new fire engine in years
- I have had discussions with some leaders of the B Street Center about the possibility of a neighborhood relations officer housed there.
- We have secured land and are having plans drawn for a new fire station on the south end of our town and updating the one currently on the north end
- We just secured a building on Tillman Ave. and our remodeling/repurposing it to become a Police Annex
- We required our Police Department to go through a rigorous certification program which they completed last year.

8. Citizen Participation – How would you encourage or promote meaningful dialogue between residents and city leaders moving forward? Would you propose any changes to how citizens can participate in commission meetings?

Curtis Gibson



As I previously stated, my aspiration is to serve as mayor for the entire community, and I commit to conducting regular community engagement initiatives, such as Town Hall meetings, throughout the year to ensure transparency and accountability, thereby empowering our citizens to stay informed about community developments. Furthermore, regarding citizen participation at commission meetings, I intend to implement changes, as I believe the current framework fosters division within our community by restricting or complicating citizen input. I would effectuate this change on day one.

Jack Hilligoss



I support and encourage our city to engage citizens and solicit their input in the planning processes we conduct. We have had hundreds of citizens take part in planning charettes for our Lake Wales Envisioned, Parks and Recreation Master Plan, Business and Economic Development Plan. I have responded to citizen's concerns over water usage by urging our City Staff to schedule an informational meeting at City Hall. I would almost never oppose having such forums. I would also encourage any citizen to reach out to me or any other commissioner at our emails-mine is jhilligoss@lakewalesfl.gov. with any question or concern. We all try to be very responsive to those. I feel our current approach to citizen participation at Commission Meetings is well suited for the purposes of those meetings which is to actually conduct the business on the agenda.

9. Inclusion – What actions have you taken in the past to support all citizens with differing viewpoints and backgrounds?

Curtis Gibson



It is essential to acknowledge that inclusion is of paramount importance because every individual possesses a unique perspective that deserves to be heard, working in corporations that have a dedicated diversity and inclusion department to ensure that all employees are treated fairly and equally. Incorporating inclusion is a vital aspect in their department, ensuring that no individual feels disrespected or marginalized in any way. As a mayor, I will strive to respect opposing viewpoints and engage in active listening, fostering open dialogue to potentially uncover innovative solutions that benefit our community, as sometimes listening is the most effective course of action.

Jack Hilligoss



I represent all the citizens of Lake Wales regardless of their viewpoints or backgrounds. I am responsible to make sure they all receive the same service from their government. I think I do that very well.

10. Governance & Policies – How do you feel about the current invocation policy at commission meetings? Are there any other city policies you believe should be updated or reformed?

Curtis Gibson



I believe that a spot for invocation should be included at city commission meetings. The policy introduced by our current mayor appears to be biased, potentially due to his background as a pastor, as it seems to dictate who is permitted to speak or give an invocation. It is essential to recognize that individuals have unique ways of connecting with their beliefs, and some find solace through invocations. I do not think anyone should be denied the opportunity to offer an invocation. It has taken me a considerable amount of time to understand this, but I have come to realize that I cannot force others to adopt my personal beliefs. However, I must respect their beliefs and refrain from disparaging or silencing them. Our differences are what make us unique, and it is essential to acknowledge and accept this diversity.

Jack Hilligoss



The current invocation policy is well written and serves the city well.
I cannot think of a current policy I would change.

11. Question for your Opponent – What is one question you would like asked of your opponent?

Curtis Gibson



Well, there are many questions I would like to pose to Jack. I will inquire as to one initiative you have introduced since being appointed or elected as an official for the City of Lake Wales that garnered support from your fellow commissioners by presenting a proposal that will benefit our community.

Jack Hilligoss



I have no questions for Mr. Gibson about the priorities he has listed in his campaign. They are the same every candidate lists and are all being pursued in an effective way now. Personally, I would ask why he has made so many false statements about me on his Social Media pages without any evidence. Why did he choose to adopt that strategy rather than simply articulating his strategy and highlighting his accomplishments?