



The GOP Podcast

Episode 5: Tom Toby for County Commission, Part 1

Reuel Sample: Good evening I'm Reuel Sample and I am joined once again by my co-host because I was absolutely lost without her last week. Patti O'Neil, welcome back.

Patti O'Neill: Good to be with you, Reuel. I'm very sorry I missed last week, but I'm so looking forward to our show tonight because we have the incomparable Tom Toby to talk to us about his run for county commissioner.

Reuel Sample: Tom, welcome to our podcast tonight.

Tom Toby: Thanks for having me on.

Reuel Sample: So you are you are new to politics. Like a lot of folks around New Hanover County and across the country. Introduce yourself to us. Tell us about Tom, Toby and why you are running for New Hanover County commissioner.

Tom Toby: A lot of people have heard me say this. My one joke is I've been in Monkey Junction since the day after the monkeys moved out. And I just this is my home. This is where I grew up. This is where I was raised. I live. I've got married here. I raised my family here. I spent my career here. I was a professional firefighter, an EMT for 26 years. And that's what I did here, serving the citizens of this county and the city and Wrightsville Beach and this is home. We have a very, very cherished place down here in southeastern North Carolina. It's unlike a lot of other places. You know, we have the ocean, we have the river, we have history. We have New Hanover County has played

huge roles in history in the past. And it's just been it's been a great place to grow up. And I have just over the years watched a lot of things that have gone on. And, you know, everybody says, oh, somebody should do something, somebody should do something. And then after watching what transpired in our area with the COVID lockdowns and what they did to small business, I'm a small business owner now. I own a towing company here in town. I started that while I was a firefighter. It took off and grew and grew. I actually, you know, retired out and left the fire service a few years ahead of my actual retirement time because my business took off. And the community has supported me and my business tremendously over the last almost 12 years now. And so during the lockdowns and seeing what was happening and watching people lose almost everything they had, I got very involved in a couple of organizations.

Tom Toby: One of them was the the reopen NC New Hanover. Had the opportunity to speak at several things, you know, was on the media, was on the news and a lot of people kept telling, man, you need to run for office, you need to run for office. And I'm like, No, no way. No how.

Reuel Sample: You're smarter than that.

Tom Toby: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Tom, Tom, Tom. Toby is not getting involved in the political arena. Well, that wouldn't go away. It just people keep people kept saying, Tom, you need to run. You need you really need to run. You're you're you know, your heart is for the community and it truly, really is. And it was about a nine month cycle. And my wife and I had talked about it, kicked it over, mold it over. And finally it came to the point we need to make a decision. And we sat down one afternoon and we talked about it and I was like, What do you think? I said, You know, I've got people that really want me to do this. I kind of feel like I'm being led, you know, I kind of feel almost a divine calling that God is kind of pointing me to this. I'm a very I'm a Christian, you know, and I believe in the power of prayer. And I felt like I was divinely being led to this. And I said, What do you think? And my wife just she just as sweet as she can be. She said, Honestly, I don't really want you to do this. And because it's a it's a huge. Yeah, well, I mean, I understand it's a huge this is not just a Tom Toby thing. This is a Toby family.

Patti O'Neill: You get everyone.

Tom Toby: Yeah. And when you get involved in this, it's everybody. It affects everybody in the family. And when she said, I really, you know, this is something I don't really want you to do this. But she looked at me and just this look, she said, But if not you, then who? What?

Patti O'Neill: I need to meet your wife. I need to.

Tom Toby: Oh, she's awesome.

Patti O'Neill: That is so perfect. Because as you're telling me this story, as you're telling us the story, I'm thinking to myself about the reluctant George Washington. Some of our greatest leaders were reluctant average citizens who did not want to be in the limelight of the politics.

Tom Toby: Exactly.

Patti O'Neill: Sometimes the divine. Taps you on the shoulder and says it's you.

Tom Toby: I went back and forth and back and forth. And, you know, I. I have a whole lot of idea about what many people in the Bible, you know, Moses, I can kind of really understand a lot of the conversations that transpired. In God when he said, I want you to go tell Pharaoh, let my people go. You know, he's like, God, you know, there's certain, you know, I don't talk good. I'm this I'm that. I had all those same conversations. But then I also was kind of like I looked back and went, okay, you know, when you look back through the Bible that the folks that didn't that weren't obedient, you know, and the stuff that happened, I kind of like, all right, God, if this is what you want me to do, I'm going to go. But you're going to have to be in it with me. And and. I am ardent in that that I will base a lot of my decision making and thought process on on you know, on prayer and on godly principles, because that is one thing that we are sorely lacking in our political arena today. You know, I taught the Constitution for the Patriot Academy. My wife and I did. And when you go back and you look at it and people get into this, oh, the founders were deist or they were this or they were that. They were all religious individuals for the most part.

Patti O'Neill: Your comment? Let my people go. It has different meanings to different people. But as it relates to your platform to being a county commissioner that is directly related to the amount of taxes we are paying, the taxation the burden of taxation on the people in our county is something that you are a champion to try to change.

Tom Toby: Well, looking at taxation wise now, they want to put it on the per vote, this half cent sales tax increase to to work on, you know, transportation projects and stuff. I'm not in favor of that. We're in a recession no matter what the Biden administration tells us and what the national media tells us, we're in a recession. People are hurting. This is not the time to add another tax. And some of the stuff they want to use that for is not transportation. I'm sorry. Bike paths in our area are not a transportation issue. That is a parks and recreation issue. There's not many people here, especially in June, July and August, they're going to ride a bicycle to work. You know, we're not a big urban area, so that type of transportation does not happen a lot here. So I'm not in favor of that additional sales tax increase. And further, just when you look at the property taxes that we pay here, yes, the county commissioners did approve a tax decrease, a property tax decrease. But when you look at our property taxes and the valuations and how much they've gone up and everything over the last several years and what the property values are, even if they do a two cent tax decrease with the value of the property has skyrocketing, we're still paying way more in taxes than we were several years ago. And it's not it's not a benefit right now.

Patti O'Neill: You're absolutely right on that. There was a large tax property tax increase a few years ago by rolling it back. People are not really seeing any benefit. They might get back to a neutral state that they were a couple of years ago. The valuations, as you've explained, have skyrocketed. So even if the tax rate is lower, it's still a percentage of now these inflated prices. So there's no relief for the common citizen of New Hanover County.

Tom Toby: Right. And we're still paying more in taxes than we were several years ago, because between that tax increase, even though it's been rolled back again with our property values going up, the house that I live in, I paid 249,900 I think for the house that I live in right now, that house is over \$350,000 valuation now. And, you know, I'm a small business owner. Had I not bought the house that I'm in when I did, I wouldn't be

able to afford to buy the house I'm in now. And so the property tax has gone up considerably just because of the valuation going up on the property.

Reuel Sample: At the same time, Tom, wasn't there a massive pay increase that the New Hanover County Commission voted on for themselves last year, while at the same time raising taxes?

Tom Toby: Yeah. I think it was on the same night they raised taxes on all of the citizens and then voted themselves. I think depending on what position they were in on the commission, it was somewhere, somewhere between a 54 and an 83% tax increase. Now, don't quote me exactly on the numbers. It's been a while since I actually looked at the exact numbers, but it was a substantial pay increase for the county commissioners. And I will say this, you know, the county commissioners have a lot to do. It is a very all consuming job. I think what would have gone over way better with the citizens and the taxpayers and especially with our municipal employees. And again, I was a municipal employee. I know what it's like when you know you're working for a local government. You know, over the last several years, you know, what what type of pay increases have our municipal employees gotten? You know, there's somewhere between one and 5% at best. And to to yeah. For the for the county commissioners to double their salary, basically, while the employees are only getting a 2% pay raise on the year, you know, I think that's kind of a slap in the face to the employees that are actually making the county happen. If the county commissioners would have done a percentage, you know, give themselves and again, I get you know, I get it. There's a lot involved with this. But it is it is. You're stepping into a an arena where you understand that this is what this public service is. It's you know, initially it's supposed to be more of a stipend than a than a career pay raise or a pay salary. So if it's going to go up, I can see that happening over time, like the employees getting a raise, but they should be getting the same. They should give themselves the same percentage raise as the employees got. I think that might have gone over way better with everybody else rather than the employees getting, you know, one and a half percent, 2%, and, you know, the commissioners getting 54%.

Patti O'Neill: So, Tom, let me ask you this. Is it is it safe to say that you're an advocate for the the working man and woman who supports New Hanover County? That's not an

executive position and that you want their quality of life and their pay scale to be equitable.

Tom Toby: Yeah. I want our working citizens. I grew up in a blue collar, working class family. My father was a construction estimator, and my mother worked for the old United Carolina Bank Mortgage Loan Department. She she was a bank officer. My parents made a a pretty decent neo middle, middle class income. That's how we grew up. But we were working class. That's what I've been my entire life. And that is the bulk of the of our community is working class citizens. And they're the ones that are carrying the burden of everything in the county and in tax wise and everything else. So we need to be looking after our working class, our small business. We need to be bringing in business here with good paying jobs. There's a lot of service industry here. We have a lot of people retiring here. And you know what? We're glad to have them. You know, I understand living here my whole life, what the attraction is and why so many people want to come here. But we can't support at all on service industry work. And we've got to do things to bring in good paying jobs. We've got to bring in jobs. And I say, you know, we've got to do stuff for industry. And when I say industry, I don't necessarily mean smokestacks and that type of stuff.

Patti O'Neill: I think the port has a lot of potential and there's a lot of money that's available for the port. But go on, tell me how you how we need to transition from service to something that's more stable that will have consistent growth and will support our community.

Tom Toby: Let me preface this with I don't have all of the answers, you know, so I don't have all the answers. But I do know that we can bring in tech industry, we can bring in light manufacturing, maybe even some medium type of manufacturing, those type of jobs, jobs that will will come in here, you know, an Amazon hub, a Walmart hub, something like that, I think. What was it? Pender County just got a an Amazon hub up there in their county that they brought in that is going to be bringing jobs to Pender County like we need to be bringing that here. And one of the things that, you know, I was very vocal about and kind of people misconstrued what I had to say about this pretty badly, the development of the West Bank across from downtown. In my lifetime. That has always been a commercial industrial type of property. The organization that wanted to come in here and rezone that property to residential and then multi-family

residential and put up 330 storey condos over there. I was very much against that and people took it to mean that I was against development and I'm not against development at all. My father was in the construction business.

Tom Toby: I worked in the construction business. I have many friends that are in the construction business here. I have many friends that own small businesses that revolve around construction, plumbers, HVAC guys, electricians, everybody that does that type of work. So I am not anti-development, but I am for better plan development and development that goes with and fits our area. And my sticking point with the West Bank is that that particular group of properties has deep water port on one side of it and trucking routes to the entire North American continent on the other side of it. How much of that land do you really think is left on the East Coast to be developed for business that can create jobs and create good jobs for our citizens? You know, if we rezone that to residential and they put up a high rise, it'll provide jobs for two years to mostly a lot of outside contractors, you know, developers will bring in. And then that that opportunity is squandered, lost and gone forever after that. The only jobs at that particular type of development will bring is going to be more service jobs, low paying service jobs.

Patti O'Neill: Okay. What I'm hearing from you is that you're pro growth. You have a background to where your father was in construction. You have been in this area for your entire lifetime. You've seen the city grow and you want it to continue to grow and to continue to provide good incomes for the residents of New Hanover County. What they're trying to do on the West Bank is not really improving the quality of life for the residents here. It is going to provide maybe a handful of jobs for a short period of time. And then it's not going to provide any sort of business or continuing tax base that is going to help New Hanover County, let alone to say about the aesthetics of it. But we're talking about business in New Hanover County. And I think your position on the West Bank is the position of many people. We're not anti-development. We just want the right development.

Tom Toby: Exactly.

Patti O'Neill: For our community, for our county, for our residents. We have enough service jobs. You just talked about that. You talked about.

Tom Toby: We don't we don't the people to fill the service jobs we have. That's why there's help wanted signs everywhere. We're going to reach a point where we're going to start going backwards because we don't have the people to fill the jobs here. This is going to start becoming a less and less attractive place for people to want to come. So we need to be bringing in more, more jobs to be able because people are going to keep coming, but they've got to have something to do when they get here.