



THE NHC GOP Podcast Transcript

Season 2, Episode 20: Development, Public Safety, and Transparency - Podcast with John Lennon

Reuel Sample: Welcome to the NHC GOP podcast I'm Reuel Sample. I am very happy and excited to be joined by Stephanie Fortunato, the second vice chair of the New Hanover County Republican Party. Stephanie, welcome to the podcast.

Stephanie Fortunato: Thank you for having me.

Reuel Sample: Stephanie has been out wearing out sneakers and shoes, talking to people because we have a very important municipal election coming up here in Wilmington, North Carolina. Stephanie, we have an opportunity to turn Wilmington red. And so you have been working very hard to make that happen.

Stephanie Fortunato: Well, yes, we're doing our best to go out and make new friends and find like minded individuals who want to ensure that we keep Wilmington. Wilmington.

Reuel Sample: I like the fact when you say like minded individuals because as we talk to people is that and share with them Republican ideas is that most people fall into that category and we're going to get into that. But what I find interesting is that in this day and age where everything is digital, you folks are taking the message and going door to door. Why do that in this day of digital age?

Stephanie Fortunato: So what we do is mobile electioneering. Electioneering is essentially, by law, allowed and protected free speech where we communicate the

people that are running for an election, we're actually allowed to knock on doors that say no soliciting because we're not soliciting. But oftentimes if we get we're getting a vibe, especially if there's big dogs and guns and scary things, we're just like, maybe we'll skip this one. But essentially one of the things that I don't know about you, but one of the things we really noticed, especially when we started door knocking two years ago, was that after everybody was locked down, people were desperate for actual connection.

Reuel Sample: That's very true, isn't it?

Stephanie Fortunato: Yeah it is. And even, you know, you you and I are both people of faith. The convenience of being able to not miss a sermon or to play it back is wonderful. But the hugs and the connections we make in church, you just can't replace those.

Reuel Sample: And so it's the same thing with talking about politics, is that that face to face communication is that is that there's no doubt people get emails, they get videos, they read the news. But there's something powerful in that face to face, 1 to 1 conversation.

Stephanie Fortunato: Well, see, you can't have a conversation digitally unless it's like this. You are listening to me answer your questions. We're exchanging ideas and there's an emotional connection that happens now. Hopefully it's a positive emotional connection.

Reuel Sample: But sometimes, sometimes you get negative emotions or people, people, people snap back at you or they'll they'll say, well, no, I'm not going to vote that way. So what are you hearing out there as you talk to people? What are people's big issues as you knock on the doors or talk to people around? What are people really concerned about?

Stephanie Fortunato: It's interesting because the way I look at it, what people are telling me and how you, you know, you alluded to Republican ideals earlier, is that the American dream is still alive and well, and it lives here in New Hanover County. It lives here on the river. It lives, you know, my neighborhood, my area, which is around Pine

Valley. It lives at the beach, municipalities it it lives here. And, you know, often times it is just about being able to have that quality of life in connection with folks around you and to live respecting one another. And, and truly, you know, to be able to own, you know, your life and, and not have, you know, government services own you. People are just tired of the big bully government telling them more money. We want more money because we have really great ideas and and only government can make your life better.

Reuel Sample: So we've got we've got three conservative candidates. John Lennon. Katheryn Brunner and Neil Anderson who are running and they all share that same idea, is that government just needs to get out of the way.

Stephanie Fortunato: Or be operated in the fashion to which our founding fathers created it. One of the things I like is when I listen to Neil Anderson talk about how he spent the better portion of the past 12 years, making decisions that would create an environment by which business can thrive, particularly the kind of business that contributes back to the community and and not just service industry, because we live in an area where we have a lot of, you know, beach rentals and things like that. We have a lot of retirees. We have a lot of college students. But one of the reasons what caught my eye about Wilmington is, is it seemed to me like a small budding city, you know, on the East Coast 12 years ago when I was looking to relocate because I have kids. And one of the things I share in common with, with John Lennon and with with Neil Anderson is that's really important to us. We want our kids to be able to, you know, have a great educational experience, which doesn't have anything to do with the city council, but after school, being able to be employed. Now, look, I think every kid should work in the service industry because once you waited a table and you've been stiffed. You you get life, you know what I'm saying?

Reuel Sample: My very first job was in McDonald's, you know, and there's, there's there's nothing like going home and smelling like Big Macs at the end of the, at the end of the shift. And so I understand where you're coming from. But what you're saying is that service jobs are great and there's nothing wrong with them. But service jobs can't be the basis of a city's economy.

Stephanie Fortunato: No, they can't. And and they're not the American dream. The American dream is to be a small business owner and to own your own home and piece

of property and be able to sustain yourself. You know, personally, take personal responsibility for your life and not have the government, you know, from cradle to grave in in the details of your life, if anything, to provide what it should to public safety, to keep taxes low by making smart decisions and to to encourage the growth of local, local business and good business attracting business. Neil's spoken about how over the past 12 years, things have changed. We've gone from being mostly a service economy to actually having attracted a lot of businesses. And I just want to comment that my youngest son, we were really excited because when he graduated from NC state this past spring with his chemical engineering job, he didn't have any jobs on the horizon. But less than two weeks after graduating, he had an international business right over in Mayfair and he's already traveled outside the country and he's getting like, you know, stuffing his passport. And I can't say enough about it was so worth everything it took to pick up our life and relocate with, you know, four kids, five pets and half a tractor trailer worth of a house. And being a homeschool mom, trying to make sure that everybody stayed on top of their schoolwork because I'm just an average person, I want everybody out there to know that if you don't have to have anything special about you. I think the highest compliment that was paid to me is that in this friend's opinion, that when I look at a person, I don't see anything but a friend, like a potential relationship.

Stephanie Fortunato: And when we talk about door knocking, I think the best door knockers and the best election years are looking for that. Now, don't don't get me wrong, this past Saturday when we were out in the rain because we're just that determined. Um, we also understood that it was probably not going to be making a lot of connections, but we were still getting the information out. And one of the things that I did when I designed our door knocking card was actually something that I felt I personally, for me, was like a a big calling card. It did all the things. So on the front, it shares about all the municipalities within Wilmington and their candidates who are registered Republicans. And then on the back it talked about our website www.newHanovergop.org, which you can volunteer. Go there, volunteer, donate and find out candidate voting and election information. But then, you know, for instance, you know, so very often when you knock hundreds of doors, you. Can't talk to hundreds of people unless you're like my husband, who just loves to go out every night in the neighborhood and meet, you know, knock on 20 to 25 doors and he gets to talk to, you know, 9 to 11 people. And but he's looking to grow our community like, we love our neighborhood and and in the, the, you know, organizational name it's called a precinct.

But really what it is is it's just the local area around here. And what we don't get a chance to talk to our neighbors. This little message says, hello, New Hanover County neighbor. That's all our neighbors remember Mister Rogers?

Reuel Sample: That's right, that's right. That's the neighborhood.

Reuel Sample: If you flip that card back over, one of the important things is that now you can take this card in to the the voting booth with you. You can also take in the sample ballot that we're going to send out to folks. But it's really important for this one because there are no R's and D's next to people's names. Is that so you don't know who the conservative Republican candidates are unless you take this card in with you that very clearly at the top, says Neil Anderson. Kathryn Brunner, who is retired Coast Guard, and John Lennon, those are the three folks that we're asking Republicans and and like minded individuals to vote for.

Stephanie Fortunato: Yes. Well, and here's the interesting thing. We did want to point out that fiscal responsibility. Free enterprise and limited government are some of those things that we share in common with many people. And I like to, again, just think of it as the American dream.

Reuel Sample: Yes. Well, you know, as, as Neil Anderson and I were talking about and, and John Lennon and I were talking about is that if you're going to build something. At your own home, you've got to go to your checkbook. And if the money's not there, you either have to figure out a way to get that money or you don't do it. And it's about time that government does the same thing. And the and these aren't just things for this election. Those ideals that you put on that card. Fiscal responsibility, individual responsibility are Republican ideas. And they're American ideas. Really. They're not really Republican ideas. They're American ideas.

Stephanie Fortunato: They're what makes America great. A socialist nation does not give its citizens a voice. It tells its citizens what to do. It's, in my opinion, it steals their hard earned dollar by over taxation, and then it redistributes it through its interpretation. But, you know, folks who get to keep what they earn are a lot more motivated to, to do more. And that in turn creates a growing economy which gives other people opportunities. You know, especially small business owners. Small business owners

create opportunities. And very often they're the kind of businesses that you like to work at. You know, the larger corporations, while, you know, they seem like it's a nice situation or chain stores and stuff, there's nothing like working for a mom and pop organization.

Reuel Sample: It's 85% of the American economy, the small businesses, and that's what generates revenue. That's what generates growth. Stephanie, I'm going to throw out some numbers to you. Is that in the 2020 2019 municipals? I'm sorry, let me bring that up. 2021 municipal elections across the country across the state is that we had 58%. Now this is across the state, 58% in-person on Election Day, 72% and 39% early. And then so then in 2021, voter voter turnout was 9% and 16%, 9% early voting 16%. So it's basically saying that across the state of North Carolina, election, election, municipal elections were determined by probably less than 23% of the population. Why is it important for Republicans to show up and vote in this municipal election?

Stephanie Fortunato: Interestingly enough, I have so many people tell me this is a blue area, but one of the things about what we do is we use smart technology. We we use data and we target folks to knock on their doors. And and we're smart about it because we know these are the folks who don't normally vote in municipal elections. When we knock on their doors, a lot of times they're like, wow, there's an election. I had no idea. So they're thankful. And then they also don't realize that it's nonpartisan. Neely Anderson won by five votes in I think it's 2019. So when it comes down to making a difference, I have to tell you, my husband sometimes lose sleep at night if he didn't get that extra, you know, amount of votes in there. And I'm just like, whoa, slow down, but not slow down there. Well, I would say this is my personal opinion that it's easy to make a difference. One vote at a time. It's easy to make a difference one voter at a time. And, you know, while it's not. A one person isn't responsible for everything. All of us working together can make a huge difference. So we have enough numbers. Right now we've knocked just a little over 5000 doors and this weekend we have another door knocking campaign, so we'll be out again. Our precinct chairs will continue to knock throughout, and then we have some fantastic folks who will actually be at the polls handing out sample ballots, which are, you know, they let you know who's there. And again, the important part is letting folks know that your vote really makes a difference here because the in a characteristically a low voter turnout election, every vote matters. And we actually don't always I mean, we love all of our candidates, but I have to say, we

have such a phenomenal lineup. You know, for people who like sports, you know, like, oh, I like all these these players. But then you're just like, oh, this season's really good. We've got some.

Stephanie Fortunato: And this is just, you know, people who really, you know, one of the things that when we talk about topics, these are the things we ask folks what really matters to them. You know, what are their what's their top. And it starts a conversation. So for instance, public safety, lower taxes, small business growth, infrastructure, economic development, better paying jobs and. You know, one of the things that's not there specifically, but is actually in our when we go out, we have a little app and it kind of gives us a cheat sheet of what to talk about. So traffic and the the way that Wilmington is growing, one of the things that people like about this area is that even though it's a city, it doesn't look like a city, and they want it to stay that way, and they want it to feel that way as well. And, you know, I come I grew up in New York City, and so I know exactly what they're talking about. Trees. You know, a tree grows in Brooklyn. I grew up in Brooklyn. I mean, I thought, and my backyard, I have to tell you, it's full of trees. People think I'm crazy living in a place where we have hurricanes because I have so many trees in my backyard. But one of the things I found when I moved out to the country and I raised my kids. I know this sounds like an oxymoron in in rural new Jersey, cows and corn was I owned trees. And I think that, you know, besides being able to own your own home and, you know, have a little plot to grow a garden in and, you know, have some flowers and mow some lawns and see some bunny rabbits and things like that is to have trees that birds come to.

Stephanie Fortunato: And it just made me feel rich. Yeah. And so I think when we look around this area, we understand somewhere in our brain besides the fact that, you know, the Japanese believe that when you are able to look at green trees, they call it a green bath for the brain. And there's actually studies that have shown that people who are convalescing, if they can look at a window at like a park like setting, they get well sooner. And I think, you know, one of the things we don't realize is the stress that happens when we can no longer see trees and I and I'm I'm not an environmentalist wacko. Let me just say that right up front. But I do understand the importance of an area not becoming stark. So responsible development, urban planning is a huge part of that. And two things can happen. We can either, which is what I understand has happened right now. We can overregulate, which forces a lot of people who would like, come in

and develop responsibly, just be so overregulated that it's just way too much money. Smaller builders that come in and they, you know, they do a beautiful job in, you know, creating green space and communities. And they make sure there are maybe there are tree buffers, like, we all love the tall pines, you know, that is, you know, one of the things that makes Pine Valley, Pine Valley. Well, I so appreciate that when I drive down 17th Street on my way to the point that there's a beautiful tree buffer, and yes, there there are apartments nestled behind some of them, but it just to me, just makes my brain so happy to see those trees, you know?

Reuel Sample: But Wilmington is Wilmington is the Azalea City, but it's also the city of trees is that you go all over the place and and and see trees. And Kathryn Bruner, who is new to politics, is very concerned about the canopy. And they're all responsible and concerned about responsible development, which is which is how it should be, is that we want our city to grow, but we want our city to grow responsibly. And so we've got a heavy lift here in Wilmington, new Hanover County is has actually more registered Republicans than Democrats. But the city of Wilmington is a little bit different. And so going back, we really, really, really do need every Republican, every and every right leaning, unaffiliated and like minded individuals to show up on Election Day. And Election Day starts this Thursday, October 19th.

Stephanie Fortunato: The numbers that I have received are that if we had in New Hanover County, every registered Republican, right leaning, unaffiliated come out for the election, we have upwards of 18,000 within the four municipalities, which is Wilmington, Wrightsville Beach, Kure Beach, and Carolina Beach. So that's a big number. And typically voter turnout is very low in most places. So it is entirely possible because of the enthusiasm of having folks come out. Now a lot of times people say, well, you know, the the, the thing that I have to say about Republicans is they're individuals and, and and they have opinions, which is one of the good things about door knocking because we listen to people's thoughts. But coming back to the same thing is that the conversation of trying to get on the same page, which is focusing hyper, focusing on what you don't like to the exclusion of what you you do like. Allows Democrats to get and stay into office. And they're not doing it with conservative, old fashioned American principles, traditional principles that want family to be able to own their own condominium townhome. You know, one of the things I enjoy as a mom over the years is watching like programs like on HGTV, which talk about like, income,

property. You know, it's entirely possible for somebody like myself or my husband to live frugally and to be able to, you know, save up, start in a small place and then keep that as a rental, that Wilmington is a fantastic place to be able to do that. But right now, things are in such a situation where they've made that very difficult. And what we're hoping to encourage is less rentals and more ownership condominiums, townhomes, private homes and have that stair step. When my kids, my my 20 something year old kids, you know, they can buy the condominium instead of, you know, pay somebody else's mortgage and have a dog.

Reuel Sample: As, as as we continue, you'll probably hear in my background one of our great city utilities, our trash being picked up today. So yeah, now elections are a big deal. Just a reminder that this is the first year where voter ID is required. But we need volunteers to work at the elections both through early voting and specifically on the day of elections as well. It's a really great time to be out talking to people as as they go in. It actually really is a wonderful, wonderful time. How can people get in touch with you to volunteer for that or to volunteer? We go. We go 365 days a year and we need volunteers all the time. Stephanie, how can they get in touch with you for that?

Stephanie Fortunato: Well, generically, they can always go through the major website, which is the NewHanovercountygop.org. But one of the things that experts will tell you is that having the personal touch, the follow up, it makes all the difference, the connection. And typically when people reach out to me via email at Vice Chair two at [New Hanover county.org](http://NewHanovercounty.org), or at my organizational phone number, which is 910833 1029. Send me a text. I'm just going to say. It's better.

Reuel Sample: Texts are wonderful.

Stephanie Fortunato: I really do my best to to follow up and make that connection. And then, you know, my husband is always saying to me, how do you keep all these details in your head? You know, I, I manage the precincts, essentially. It's all the neighborhoods in New Hanover County. Um, and, and they're people that live there. So that this way when I, when somebody makes a connection to me, I think, oh, you live near so-and-so. And oh, they would just love and be thrilled to hear from you. Like, for instance, you know, there's a number of ladies that are right here in this area that would just love somebody to just be able to drive them while they go out and they hang door

hangers, which I'm going to go out this afternoon and I'm going to work with somebody. And, you know, we're going to work as a team. There's, you know, people who answer phones in the office and take messages. We do a lot of fun things through the year to register voters. I don't think of it as work. I think of it as an opportunity to make friends and and make my community here in New Hanover County better. The the best time I have and the most reassurance I have that these are happening in an effective way is so very often, you know, folks come to the table and they want to know some information. And so we start chatting and they go in and they vote and they come back out and I'm like, okay, I want to help. And so yeah, that's why, you know, a lot of times I really don't get well, honestly, if I had, you know, 25 of me, that would be, you know, like the old fashioned Bret commercial. Do you remember the old fashioned Bret commercial.

Speaker3: I remember the Bret commercials.

Stephanie Fortunato: So I told two friends and they told two friends and so on and so on and so on. That is how an organization grows by creating an atmosphere where folks enjoy it. So this Saturday morning. We're going to get together and have Chick Fil A sandwiches, and we're going to have a little chat about what we're going to do to get out there. We're going to spend a couple of hours saying hey to the folks, giving them the information. That's our that's our mobile election called Door knocking. But this Thursday we will be at the Northeast Library and we will be saying, good morning, good afternoon to folks who want to come out and do early voting. Early voting is really important because of two reasons. It helps us to spread our resources out better, and it also helps candidates. One of the great complaints people have about candidates is that they want the the average Joe to be able to get elected. Well, it takes money to get elected with resources. I try to offset those resources by providing the free service that is laid out in in our organizational bylaws, which are the volunteers. We don't charge for volunteers, but people come and they come and they go. So when folks come, I want everybody to know, even if you're just giving an hour, it's terrific.

Stephanie Fortunato: It makes a difference. So we're going to have folks who are out there. They're going to hand out information, they're going to make friends. And the sooner you get to the polls, the sooner we'll know that we don't have to maybe get out and keep working like the crazy people that we are now. Trust me, we will anyway,

because it's what we love to do. Last year, the day before Election day, I was out knocking doors in Pine Valley for about 062 eight hours and I knocked about 150 doors. Now, granted, most people aren't home, so I hang my little door hanger and ring the bell and I keep moving. But every so often I meet up with some folks and it's a terrific conversation, whether it's at your door or it's it's at our table when you're coming and going. The most important thing is we want to let people know if you want to see Wilmington and its local areas remain the old fashioned American values, then you need to get out and support these candidates. These are the candidates that don't have the big bucks, but they do have the big heart. And they're going to give you their time because remember something, they also have regular jobs while they're doing this work.

Speaker3: That's right.

Stephanie Fortunato: Just like we have regular jobs while we're doing this work. And, you know, so very often people say, well, the Democrats pay their people, you know, that. And they're organized and they run this as a business and all that kind of stuff. I have to tell you, the the hearts that I see coming to our organization and giving their time, for instance, you know, I'm going to embarrass you a little bit. Well, your skills in marketing and as a podcaster, I mean, you're giving them to us for free. You don't charge us for these things. And, you know, first of all, it makes us look pretty, you know, well, put together like, oh, aren't we fancy?

Reuel Sample: That's because I've got the face for radio.

Stephanie Fortunato: So thank you for doing that. Well, we really appreciate you because I couldn't do this myself.

Reuel Sample: But but you're doing it just now. But the big thing is, is that is that Republicans have to get over this idea that we only show up for Election Day. Is that what I want to see happen on Election Day? Because the the counts don't drop until Election Day. So every, every time Republicans start Election day in the hole and and and well.

Stephanie Fortunato: And you know, here's the thing, guys. Let me tell you something. Truthfully, the Democrats utilize that mysterious machine. Breakdowns happen and that alone, you know, okay. So everybody now thinks I'm a crazy conspiracy theorist. Well, listen, if I wanted to defeat my enemies, maybe, maybe if I were concerned about cheating, some of those things would be there. So what I would say is I would hedge my bets because first of all, we get sick, our kids get sick, our car breaks down, life happens. So as soon as you can come on out and vote. Not only that, it really gets us all excited about that. And you know what? It kind of psychs out the other side. This past election in 2022, I was a site manager at the senior center, and we went toe to toe all the way through early voting. And for the first time ever, we won early voting. And it was because not only did everyone get out and door knock and let folks know, hey, come on out! It was because during the the time at the polls, we were talking to a lot of folks who were there. And that doesn't necessarily mean that these were all Republicans, even though I have to say, if all the Republicans came out to vote in this election, we would blow the doors off this election.

Reuel Sample: We want every we want every Republican. And so early voting starts October 19th at the at the regional library to begin with. And then other areas will start opening up. Make sure that you check the NewHanovergop.org website for all of that schedules. You can find out more about the Wilmington City candidates, as well as the municipal races going on, and Carolina Beach and Wrightsville Beach and Kure Beach.

Stephanie Fortunato: Don't forget, if you misplace your door hanger, you can go to our website and get a digital sample ballot that you can have on your phone as you go inside. But please say hey to the folks because it gets a little lonely out there. We're like the Maytag repair people, you know, come and say, hey, let us know that you're excited and, you know, bring us some coffee if you don't want to stick around, we're okay with that. If you want to come to a meeting, we have meetings once a month. Check our website for those events and listen to the candidates learn more. We have a really great growing community and and keep an eye out everyone, because we're going to try something new this year for municipals, and we're going to send out an organized text message, which will also give you all of this information. So it's it's helpful and all of this stuff, we are very, very careful with how we invest our resources, our organizational resources, but it does take some financial support. And if you can sign up for the 15 For

freedom, it's going to make a difference. As we move forward into the major mass of 2024 for preparation for the big presidential election next year.

Reuel Sample: Stephanie Fortunato, second vice chair. Whenever we whenever we lose power at the GOP, we just hook her up to it. And so she she has energy to spare. Please give her a jingle or send her an email if you want to volunteer for the New Hanover County GOP. And please, please, please get out to vote. Stephanie, thanks for being on our podcast.

Stephanie Fortunato: Thank you Reuel.