



## **THE NHC GOP Podcast Transcript**

### **Season 2, Episode 18: Development, Public Safety, and Transparency - Podcast with John Lennon**

**Reuel Sample:** Welcome to the NHC GOP podcast. I'm Reuel Sample. Happy to be joined by John Lennon, one of three conservative Republicans running for city council in this year's municipal elections. John, welcome to the podcast.

**John Lennon:** Thank you, Reuel I'm happy to be here. Appreciate the opportunity.

**Reuel Sample:** Oh, it's great to have you. I know that you're busy and I appreciate that you are taking time out, not just from the campaign, but you also have a business to run. And so thank you for being here. John, you're new to politics. This is the first time you're running for office. But that is not the first time of you being involved with government. So tell us about that. Why are you getting involved at this level right now?

**John Lennon:** Yeah, happy to. So that's correct. This is the first office that I've run for in in government. But prior to that, I've lived in Wilmington for 25 years. My wife was born and raised here and we met at NC State in the mid 80s and moved here for good in 98 and quickly decided that I really I had known while we were dating that we'd end up here and I knew this was a community that I wanted to embrace and and help improve. And so early on got involved in the task force for the convention center that is now downtown. And then in 2005, I was appointed to the airport authority by the county commissioners and loved that post. Was on the airport authority for eight years, two as chairman. And it's amazing. People don't realize how long it takes to get anything done at the airport. But it's really it was a great learning experience also because. An airport is really nothing more than a landlord. You know, there's a neat component, the fact that

airplanes take off and land there. But at the end of the day, it's an economic driver for the region and it relies on user fees and state funds, local funds and federal funds. And so balancing all of that was a great experience for me. In 13, I was appointed to the State Board of Transportation and served for just almost four years. I was the member of the Board of Transportation that dealt with the ports and aviation.

**John Lennon:** So obviously our port here in Wilmington and the other one in Morehead, and then there are 72 airports throughout North Carolina. My claim to fame is that I've been to 52 of them. And, but, but again, much, much like it is in our area, you know, people don't think about it. But the airport in Elkin, North Carolina, has as much economic impact pro rata for that county as our airport here does. So I worked diligently on that and then also was appointed by the governor to head up an aviation development task force. And that was really we were charged with the idea that growth in our small general aviation airports would really be an inexpensive way for the state to promote economic development throughout North Carolina and learned very quickly that the legislature is where the money is. And so I spent a lot. I would I would literally check into a meeting at the board of Transportation and be counted as present and present and then sneak out and run across the street and meet with legislators to impress upon them the importance of the aviation system in the state. And thankfully, we were able to pretty much double the budget. There was an example of every dollar that is invested provides a return of about \$19. And keep in mind, that's that number is almost ten years old now. So it's I'm sure it's improved.

**Reuel Sample:** But because airports, they're they're not just about passengers, they're about freight. They're about, as you said, landlord development, economic development. It's it's really a financial generator.

**John Lennon:** No question. One of the best examples I could give you is there's a small airport in Burlington, North Carolina, outside Greensboro and LabCorp, which is a testing company, has pretty much their own Fedex fleet. They will fly samples not only around North Carolina, but everywhere. And they all go there to that airport in Burlington. So, you know, you go in the daytime and you'll see your normal business traveler and general aviation folks, but at night time, you'll see a lot of air traffic taking samples back and forth. And you never would you never would think about that unless

you go out and see it and all the jobs that that provides and the opportunities that it provides.

**Reuel Sample:** So it's a big jump, though, from or maybe it's not from going to developing these economic generators like airports and other port authorities to being in city council and probably one of the fastest growing cities in North Carolina.

**John Lennon:** It is. But, you know, ultimately the fundamentals are the same. I have been on the city Planning Commission here in Wilmington for the last three years. And so not only experiencing the growth from I first started coming here in the mid 80s. Not only seeing the growth that's occurred, but then understanding that how to harness that growth and to make sure that it benefits all of our citizens and provides opportunities for all of our citizens. And so that's why I say the fundamentals of that are really not that different. It takes collaboration, it takes listening, it takes tenacity. And and sometimes it takes a lot of patience.

**Reuel Sample:** When you're dealing with government is always, always a lesson in patience, always. So now as we grow, one of the big questions always comes down to public safety, whether it's police department, fire department, whether whether the statistics show it or not. You and I talked about this earlier is that if you don't feel safe, then then that perception becomes reality. And public safety is one of the big things of your platform as you run for city council. Tell us about that. What is your focus here?

**John Lennon:** Absolutely. I think that the you know, crime is something that can all of the things that politicians and government employees talk about, you know, the economic drivers and the new projects and all of that, that can all be wiped away with the perception of the general public not feeling safe. And so I think that the number one thing is to make sure that our police department has the resources that it needs. And and you hear a lot about this, about why are they not doing this? Why are they not doing that? Let's keep in mind that it's only recently that city council increased the starting pay for a Wilmington police officer to \$46,000 a year. Think about that.

**Reuel Sample:** What were they making before then?

**John Lennon:** 38.

**Reuel Sample:** So you had police officers going out, putting their lives on the line for less than actually what I was making as managing a restaurant back in my 20s. So that's a lot.

**John Lennon:** Correct. And so and then we wonder why there are vacant positions within the department. And I think and I think a big part of that also is retention. You know, we focus on filling spots, but I think retention is a huge part in making sure that the officers, you know. Police officers and firefighters have to see a lot of things that you and I don't even think about on a daily basis. And so we need to make sure that they're getting the best resources that they can. That's that's step number one, because without without those bodies in the positions, it's impossible to provide the level of services that we all need. Their calls for service are tremendous. And I think that that's going to continue as the city grows. So we need to make sure that the police department and the fire department grow accordingly with that. The other thing is, I think is getting, you know, one of the things that doing that provides is an opportunity for police to actually get out in the community. So instead of being reactive, they have the ability to be proactive. You know, you hear a lot of people, well, why don't they come and participate in the neighbor? Well, because they're running 25 calls, you know, over the last two hours, and they literally don't have time to do that. And so we've got to we've got to do that. We've got to go back to the day where, you know, I grew up in Washington, DC, and Officer Friendly was a real thing.

**John Lennon:** I mean, Officer Friendly came to your school and you saw Officer Friendly on the corner and and you revered them, frankly, because they, you know, a, they were a public servant and B, they were there to protect you. So I think we need to work to get back to that point. It also means, though, that we have to have a zero tolerance policy. I think, you know, the fact that it's unfortunate that we've got a generation that more and more is are resolving their issues with a gun. And and we need to have a zero tolerance policy and we need not wait for things to shake up in our backyard. You know, one of the things that really got to me was my daughter was right around the corner with a shooting at New Hanover High School and the catwalk. And so I did what every dad's not supposed to do. I jumped in my car and drove down to the high school.

**Reuel Sample:** Its your daughter!

**John Lennon:** Yes, exactly. Exactly. And and but, you know, and I'll never forget walking out onto Market Street and looking it was like an armed encampment with the number of law enforcement and public safety people that were there. And I remember one of our politicians made a comment that said we were really lucky today.

**John Lennon:** I said No, that's not really what we want to say. We weren't lucky. You know, this this problem has been brewing for a long time, so we can't allow violent elements to they can't be active members of society. We've that that we have to have that zero tolerance. By the same token, though, I think we have to understand and I'm going full circle here that handcuffs aren't always the answer to to preventing crime. And so a great example to segue into, you know, people who've listened to me speak before have heard me complain about the 2014 parks and transportation bond, which is not finished yet, almost ten years later. Well, you know, one of the one of the elements there, there are multiple park improvements, trail improvements. The MLK Center was a project that to be expanded upon and improved upon, and it's not done. And so if we're not providing other outlets for our kids, then what do we expect? It's going to happen?

**Reuel Sample:** Yeah, yeah. It goes back to the there's, there's patience with government and then there's exasperation with government. And it sounds like. I like what you're saying about handcuffs don't always solve crime is that you know Officer Friendly was also walking the beat and getting to know people and and in the process creating those relationships that stop crime and and and that's we've missed that we've gotten away from that because our police are responding reacting they can't be proactive and and and I like that focus that you've got.

**Reuel Sample:** The other thing that we talk about which kind of leads into this is the affordable housing issue is that Wilmington has been discovered. There's no doubt about that. You used to have to want to come to Wilmington because nothing passes through here. Is that is that you've got to get off and then come in. But people are moving to Wilmington. And so we've got we've got a housing issue and we're not talking we're not talking low income. We're talking housing issue across the spectrum.

**John Lennon:** Absolutely. So I'm in the real estate world. I have been since I moved here. And, you know, on any I think the last time I looked was Friday in our multiple listing service for new for New Hanover County, just in New Hanover County. Not including the beaches. There are less than 500 homes for sale. And so that that number has been as low as 300. A normal market, if there is such a thing, is normally about 2500 properties available for sale. So it gives you an idea anecdotally that there is a huge shortage of housing for not only the folks who are coming, but the folks who are here right now currently. So the folks whose family size has increased and they need to move into a larger home, the folks whose family size has decreased and they're ready to downsize. The folks like my two adult children who have graduated from college. I still have another one in college that would love to be able to go out and get their own place and not have to pay 15 to \$1800 for for an apartment. So I think that I think that that is something that we need to look at it that, you know, the city's new land development code is a great first step in doing everything from looking at height, looking at density, looking at the inclusion of workforce housing components and housing projects. Something as simple as the inclusion of accessory dwelling units or ADUs you might hear them referred to, which if you have a single family home, you can and you have a garage out back. You can build an apartment over that to rent out without. Obviously you have to get permits, but without really asking for for zoning permission, you know, something as little as that provides not only an additional housing opportunity, but it also provides an opportunity for a homeowner to maximize their their property.

**Reuel Sample:** What you're talking about is is really a a Republican idea of not government solving it, but government clearing the way. So that businesses, real estate companies, even families, can solve the issues on their own.

**John Lennon:** There's no doubt. The market is going to take care of of the problem. But we have to let that happen. And so one of the things that is really unsettling to me is I've talked to people in the campaign and people that I've known in the 25 years I've been here. Obviously, a lot of them are in the real estate and development community, and I have had more than one developer tell me that they've developed their last project in the city of Wilmington because it's so hard. There need to be regulations. There need to be, you know, four walls, boundaries meaning for it shouldn't be a free for all. But it also should also be a situation where we are encouraging, you know, innovative developers that addresses a serious need.

**Reuel Sample:** You're also up against some regulations from the federal level. You're also up against rising interest rates that are just killing people who want to buy a new house. So it's going to be it's going to be a tough go.

**John Lennon:** It is because one of the one of the things that people don't think about a lot is that there's also a sector of our growth that are primarily either retirees or close to retirement. And and and that's part of my my day job, so to speak. I deal with a lot of those folks. And one of the things in talking to, you know, a thousand people from out of the market that you learn very quickly here recently is they have two things in common. And one is they don't care about interest rates and the other is they're leaving where they are. And and so the reason they're not caring about interest rates is relevant is because let's let's pick on Washington, D.C. They've, you know, a couple work for the federal government for 20 plus years. They bought a house for \$40,000.30 years ago. They just sold it for \$950,000. They have six figure pension between the two of them. Wilmington's looking pretty good.

**Reuel Sample:** They're going to pay cash for a house here.

**John Lennon:** Yeah, sure, sure. And so what does that do when you have a short market supply? What does that do to the price? It drives it up. So that's one of the interesting things that a lot of people have not really talked about, is that our prices here locally have really not dropped. You know, now some of the larger builders, the national builders that put up 30 and 40 and 50 speculative homes at a time. Sure, they've had to adjust their pricing, but in our medium priced homes, the price has not gone down. Inventory has gone down for sure.

**Reuel Sample:** It's really great having a real estate professional going on city council at this time where we are facing things like infrastructure, housing, public safety, because you're looking at it not just from the government side when you get on that city council, but you're bringing this wealth of information from various parts of the country, including time here in Wilmington, to give good conservative Republican answers to these issues. And that's refreshing.

**John Lennon:** No, and I appreciate that. And I think it's it's it's ironic because one of the things that I'm hearing more of is, you know, another real estate person on city council. And the question comes up in public a lot as to why are so many real estate people involved in politics. To which I sort of tongue in cheek say, I don't know. Why aren't you involved in politics? And but in all seriousness, I think it's because because I care and I'm not going to apologize. My wife is also in residential real estate, and we've raised our kids, sent them to college and, you know, made a life for ourselves here because of that. So. But what it has done, to your point is given me a some inside baseball, so to speak, on how the process works, where the stumbling blocks in the process and what are things that we can do from a government perspective to, you know, address a need, but also make sure that the citizens of Wilmington who are here continue to receive services and a quality of life like no other.

**Reuel Sample:** I'm going to throw you a curve ball because we usually talk about things before we go on to the podcast. But one of the things that's on your website, that's [electJohnLennon.com](http://electJohnLennon.com) we'll talk more about that is a Growing City. A growing city requires leaders committed to fiscal responsibility. What is fiscal responsibility at the Wilmington level?

**John Lennon:** I think that's a broad question, but I think fiscal responsibility is when you pass a bond project and you tell the public that you're going to spend tens of millions of dollars to make their quality of life better, then you better do it. You better you better not wait 9 or 10 years to do it. That's not fiscally responsible. If you did that in your business. If I did that in my business, we would be out of business. Fiscal responsibility is making sure that instead of, you know, one of the examples I use, instead of a Department of ten planning professionals all making I'm making these numbers up, making \$60,000 a year, why don't we have five making over \$100,000 a year? Why don't we have the the best that can be held to a level of accountability that we know we've got the best and the brightest there. To me, that's fiscally responsible. Instead of having multiple bodies who are taking this job because the private jobs are all filled up, that doesn't compute. Everybody's favorite. The PPD building is a great example of fiscal responsibility. I would challenge anybody listening to this to tell me how many times they had heard that the city was going to have to spend \$94 million to renovate Chestnut Street before this all came up. And yet it was presented to council and it was presented to the public as if, yes, everyone knows this, the Chestnut Street building,



you know, it's outdated. It doesn't work for us. People are split up. And it was it's going to cost us \$94 million to renovate it. That was the first time I'd ever heard that number.

**John Lennon:** And yet it was used as an argument to acquire, you know, a \$68 million asset. And my position on that building is and I'm not deflecting at all, I'm being totally honest when I say I don't know if it was a good idea or not. And that is my bigger problem is that the level of information provided to the public, in my opinion, was woefully inadequate. And the the fact that they're saying that it was done without a property tax increase simply means that that tax increase is deferred. And if you go back and look, you'll remember that initially it was sold as a three cent increase, then it dropped to a \$0.01 increase and suddenly it was a zero. Well, okay, that's interesting. And then we hear that, well, we need to move into the top floors because we'll save air quotes, you know, millions of dollars up fitting that space to accommodate our offices. No, you won't. You're deferring the expense for the build out that you'll have to do for the tenants that you're going to lease the lower floors to. So it's either spend now, spend later, you know, And why are we moving into a preexisting built out office space instead of if we're going to own the building, then then let's do it the way it needs to be done and let's provide the space that we need to have. So that's very frustrating. And just the the I watched a presentation the other night on the soccer fields on 421 and the inability to get that project done and get it done within budget, it's just inexplicable to me.

**Reuel Sample:** I've said before on this podcast and other places is that I want I want our elected leaders to govern and sometimes they've got to make tough, tough choices. But I also want them to be transparent on how they came to those decisions and how they made those choices. And what you're saying is, is that it hasn't really been quite clear on how we've arrived at a lot of our decisions here in the city of Wilmington.

**John Lennon:** I would agree with that 100%. And I think the it was curious to me, because I don't want to misspeak, but my recollection is I'm pretty sure every vote in regards to this building was seven to zip, which leads me to believe that there was a whole lot of conversation offline prior to this. And sure, the right things were said publicly to, you know, let people know there had been thought about. But this was to in my opinion, this was too big of an investment. It was too big of a deal. It was too big of a course of direction for the city to not involve the public more

**Reuel Sample:** John Lennon is one of three conservative candidates running for the city council. Technically, it is a nonpartisan race, But let's be very clear is that you have three very good Republicans up against three Democrats. We have a chance to make a big change here in Wilmington. John Lennon is running for office along with two others. Voting starts October 19th. That's not that far away, John.

**John Lennon:** Not that far away.

**Reuel Sample:** And you're probably out door knocking. You're probably out talking to people. You're going to events after events, after events and getting getting out there.

**John Lennon:** Doing it, doing it all for sure. I had a neighborhood meet and greet this morning before coming on with you and got a full day.

**Reuel Sample:** Neal Anderson, John Lennon, Kathryn Bruner running for City Council. The website is [ElectJohnLennon.com](http://ElectJohnLennon.com). How else can they get in touch with you, John.

**Speaker3:** I'll give mt cell phone number. (910) 512-5895.

**Reuel Sample:** You're a brave man that's a that that's start blowing up that cell phone because you know one of the things is that we want people to call and ask whether you're a Democrat, Republican, unaffiliated. I am convinced that once you get to know Republicans and the agenda that we want to do is that most people will find that we fall in line with them and we we uphold the majority of people's opinions and their values. So, John, I'll give you the last word.

**John Lennon:** I just I'm grateful for the opportunity to come on and I'm grateful to the support of everyone that's helped with this campaign. I really I love this city. This is going to be my home forever. And my children have grown up with opportunities because of the growth that this city has experienced. And I want to make sure that that growth continues in a way to provide opportunities for all the citizens of Wilmington today and tomorrow

**Reuel Sample:** John Lennon for City Council, thanks for being here.

**John Lennon:** Thank you so much.