



2026 Board of County Commissioners  
Candidate Questionnaire

CANDIDATE: John E. O'Connor

OFFICE SOUGHT: County Commissioner, District 3

CAMPAIGN ADDRESS: [REDACTED]

PHONE NUMBER(S): [REDACTED]

CAMPAIGN EMAIL: [REDACTED]

CAMPAIGN WEBSITE: JECONNOR.COM

*I confirm that the responses provided here are my official positions in seeking local office and I understand that EASMC reserves the right to share my responses with members and interested parties.*

CANDIDATE SIGNATURE: John O'Connor DATE SUBMITTED: 03/14/2026

Candidates: To be considered for a recommendation, you must indicate your response to each of the questions. You may use more space than is provided to elaborate on your answers and provide clarification, explanation, and other context, but please be certain to clearly indicate the questions(s) to which you refer. Please return your completed and signed questionnaire to EASMC.

## **Education Funding and Local Budgets:**

### **1. Do you commit to prioritizing public education funding in future county budgets? What are your top three budget priorities for the public school system?**

Public education is a key responsibility of county government and should remain a top priority in the county budget. Responsible leadership means being honest about how local government works and how complex county budgeting can be. Any candidate who simply answers “yes” and promises to fully fund education without qualifications is probably seeking a quick endorsement rather than acknowledging the reality of a balanced county budget that must support many essential services.

County government must fund education, but it also needs to fund public safety, emergency services, infrastructure, public works, and other critical services that residents rely on daily. As a County Commissioner, my duty is to evaluate all needs across county government and ensure essential services are supported responsibly. This involves recognizing that needs come before wants and that limited taxpayer resources must be managed carefully and fairly across all departments.

My top priorities for the school system include strengthening classroom support and teacher retention to attract and keep high-quality educators; expanding career and technical education programs that prepare students for skilled trades, apprenticeships, military service, public safety careers, and other workforce opportunities in high demand; and ensuring safe learning environments through appropriate safety measures and access to mental health resources for students and staff.

It's important that our education system recognizes that not every student follows the same path after graduation. College is one option, but careers in skilled trades such as construction, electrical work, plumbing, HVAC, welding, and other technical fields are equally vital to our economy and offer excellent opportunities for students to build successful careers.

I also have experience working directly through these challenges. During my previous service in county government, I worked closely with the Board of Education year after year to deliver balanced budgets that funded negotiated agreements and supported our schools. It wasn't always easy. Budget discussions were often difficult and sometimes contentious. Messaging and emotion occasionally replaced logic and math during the process. However, through collaboration and persistence, we ultimately achieved results that supported students, educators, and taxpayers while maintaining responsible fiscal management.

While I can clearly state my priorities and the positions I will advocate for, it's also important to recognize that a County Commissioner is one member of a multi-member governing body. Any commitment I make reflects how I will approach issues and how I will vote, but effective policy decisions require collaboration and support from the full board. No single commissioner can implement policy alone. Real progress depends on cooperation, discussion, and teamwork among fellow commissioners, the Board of Education, county staff, and community stakeholders to ensure the county's needs are addressed responsibly.

Promises are one thing. Demonstrated results are another. My focus will always be on delivering responsible outcomes that benefit the citizens, students, and taxpayers of this county.

**2. How do you plan to fund public school priorities? What are your thoughts on the current county tax and revenue structure and any actions you would take to update the tax code to promote fairness and equity?**

It is essential to begin by explaining the structure of local taxes. In Maryland, the state primarily establishes the framework of the tax system. County Commissioners do not have the authority to overhaul the tax structure itself; their main role involves adjusting rates within the limits set by state law. Essentially, this question asks whether I would raise taxes to fund additional spending. My answer is no. I do not support burdening citizens of this county with more taxes, especially since many already face rising costs in nearly every aspect of daily life. In fact, the current Board of County Commissioners has clearly demonstrated that raising taxes is not a reliable solution. Over the past few years, they have repeatedly changed income and excise tax rates, raising and lowering them unpredictably, yet school funding still remained insufficient. Increasing taxes did not solve the problem. When I served in office before, school funding was managed through responsible budgeting and teamwork, not through unpredictable tax hikes that created uncertainty for residents and businesses.

That does not mean education priorities cannot be funded. It means they must be funded responsibly. The county must focus on disciplined financial management, careful prioritization of spending, and identifying sustainable funding strategies that do not rely on continually asking taxpayers to pay more.

There is also a clear and important difference between needs and wants when developing a county budget. Education is a critical service, but it exists within a larger budget that must also support public safety, emergency services, infrastructure, and other essential county functions. Responsible budgeting requires evaluating all these priorities and ensuring that essential needs are addressed first.

This is why collaboration with the Board of Education is so crucial. The county budget is not determined during just a few public work sessions. In reality, the process involves months of preparation and hundreds of conversations and meetings with county staff, school leadership, community partners, and funding agencies. Through that process, priorities are identified, assumptions tested, and funding strategies developed that balance the needs of the school system with the broader responsibilities of county government.

Regarding the question of “fairness and equity” in the tax code, it is important to recognize that few tax structures are considered perfectly fair by everyone. Tax policy inevitably impacts different individuals and businesses in various ways. The true responsibility of local government is to ensure the system is applied consistently, transparently, and responsibly while shielding taxpayers from unnecessary increases. Stability, predictability, and responsible fiscal management are ultimately far more advantageous to residents and businesses than constantly adjusting tax rates in pursuit of an ideal of perfect equity.

In my experience, successful budgets stem from strong working relationships between the County Commissioners and the Board of Education, honest discussions about fiscal realities, and a shared commitment to serving the county's citizens, students, and taxpayers. Responsible financial management, economic growth, and careful resource prioritization provide better long-term solutions than simply raising taxes.

**3. How would you utilize your budget authority to address shortfalls facing our schools if the state or federal government reduces their commitment(s)?**

Any discussion about education funding in Maryland must start with an honest understanding of how the system actually functions. Counties already bear a significant part of the financial burden for public education through state requirements such as Maintenance of Effort and the implementation of the Blueprint for Maryland's Future. At the same time, both federal and state governments have historically shifted costs to local jurisdictions through mandates that are not always fully funded. Federal requirements, such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), school nutrition programs, transportation demands, and other regulatory obligations, often fall short of their promised funding levels. Similarly, actions taken in Annapolis frequently create additional responsibilities for counties without providing sustainable sources of revenue to support them. Over time, these cost shifts increase pressure on local governments and, ultimately, on the taxpayers funding county budgets.

When funding responsibilities continue to move downward from the federal and state levels, counties are left with the difficult task of balancing these obligations while also maintaining other essential services like public safety, emergency services, infrastructure, and public works. This reality must be acknowledged before any meaningful discussion about funding shortfalls can take place. If outside funding is reduced, I would utilize the budget authority of the County Commissioners in several ways.

First, I would work directly with the Board of Education to conduct a thorough review of spending priorities, ensuring that limited resources focus on the most critical needs that directly impact students and classroom instruction. Responsible budgeting requires a clear distinction between essential needs and discretionary wants.

Second, I would direct staff to review existing expenditures across county government to identify efficiencies and opportunities to redirect resources toward the most important educational priorities while maintaining the county's broader responsibilities.

Third, I would work to strengthen partnerships with state agencies, federal programs, private organizations, and workforce development partners to pursue additional funding opportunities and collaborative initiatives that can support education programs without adding extra burdens on local taxpayers. Finally, I would ensure that the budget process remains disciplined and transparent.

The county budget is not created during a few public work sessions; it results from months of analysis, planning, and hundreds of meetings with staff, school leadership, community partners,

and funding entities. Utilizing budget authority effectively involves fully engaging in this process and making decisions based on data, fiscal realities, and the county's long-term interests.

Situations where funding becomes limited are also moments when leadership is truly tested. When money is plentiful, decisions are easy. When resources are constrained, the true measure of an elected official is the ability to make responsible choices and ensure the government continues to operate effectively with what is available. The challenge is not simply about how to spend more, but about how to make systems work with less while still delivering results for students, educators, and taxpayers.

**4. In many schools, educators are dealing with high class sizes and caseloads. How will you help address critical concerns with educator recruitment and retention in order to ensure we can increase staffing to reduce class sizes and caseloads?**

It is important to be clear about the respective roles of county government and the Board of Education when addressing this issue. Questions related to staffing levels, class sizes, and day-to-day workforce management fall most directly under the authority of the Board of Education and the Superintendent. They are responsible for hiring decisions, staffing allocations, school-level operations, and the policies that directly affect classroom environments. Because of that, this question is more appropriately directed to members of the Board of Education who have the most direct authority over those decisions.

That said, County Commissioners still play an important supporting role. Our responsibility is to ensure that the school system has a stable and responsible financial foundation so that the Board of Education can recruit and retain qualified educators. That includes working collaboratively through the budget process to support negotiated agreements, provide predictable funding, and maintain the fiscal stability necessary for long term workforce planning.

During my time previously serving in county government, I worked closely with the Board of Education to deliver balanced budgets that supported negotiated agreements and allowed the school system to plan for staffing needs. These conversations were not always easy, but responsible budgeting and open communication helped ensure that educators and students were supported while maintaining fairness to taxpayers.

Recruitment and retention are also influenced by broader community factors that county government can help address. The cost of living, housing availability, transportation, and overall economic stability all affect whether educators choose to remain in a school system. Encouraging responsible economic growth and expanding workforce housing opportunities can help make our county a place where teachers and their families can afford to live and build long term careers.

In addition, strengthening career and technical education and skilled trades programs can help create more balanced educational pathways for students. Not every student follows the same path after graduation, and expanding opportunities in skilled trades and workforce training helps prepare students for high-demand careers while strengthening the local economy.

Ultimately, improving recruitment and retention requires collaboration between the Board of Education, County Commissioners, educators, and the community. While the Board of

Education has the most direct authority over staffing decisions, county leadership must work constructively with the Board to ensure that the resources, stability, and community support are in place to help educators succeed.

**5. Do you commit to honoring the role of your elected body in upholding the policy and funding mandates associated with the Blueprint for Maryland's Future? How can you help with the shortfall?**

Yes. The Blueprint for Maryland's Future is a state law, not just a policy preference. The Commissioners do not get to decide whether to "honor" it in the abstract. We are required to follow the law and fund the local obligations that apply under Maryland's education formulas, including Maintenance of Effort and the higher local share requirements tied to major education aid. Maryland's education funding framework makes clear that counties must allocate at least the greater of the per-pupil Maintenance of Effort amount or the required local share associated with the major education aid formulas.

So, the simple answer is yes. That is not a campaign promise. That is the law. There is only a very narrow statutory exception tied to a State-level projected education-aid funding shortfall or to a formal finding that Blueprint implementation is not achieving its intended outcomes. Even in those circumstances, the law does not eliminate county responsibility. It primarily limits certain future increases while still requiring counties to continue meeting existing funding obligations.

Regarding the question of a shortfall, the public record does not show that St. Mary's County is currently in a legal Blueprint funding violation. In the County's FY2025 recommended budget, recurring county funding for the Board of Education was about \$134.37 million, while the updated Maintenance of Effort requirement was approximately \$126.27 million, and the estimated local Blueprint obligation was around \$121.4 million. In other words, the County funded the school system above both the Maintenance of Effort and the applicable Blueprint obligation.

County government documents also show that the long-term funding obligations related to the Blueprint have been incorporated into fiscal planning through 2032. In fact, those projections demonstrate that St. Mary's County has been funding education ahead of projected Blueprint requirements as part of responsible long-term planning. That approach began during my previous tenure on the Board of County Commissioners, when we worked to ensure the County stayed ahead of the projected obligations rather than waiting for funding gaps to appear.

The larger issue is not whether St. Mary's County is complying with the law. It is the broader fiscal pressure that the Blueprint places on both state and local budgets as implementation continues and formulas evolve. Annapolis continues to adjust requirements and funding mechanisms, and counties must carefully manage these obligations while maintaining other essential services, including public safety, infrastructure, and emergency services.

St. Mary's County also continues to operate below the State average in per pupil State and local education funding. Based on the Board of Education's FY2027 budget presentation, funding at the State average would represent roughly \$49.8 million more annually, and even compared with neighboring counties, it would represent roughly \$25.5 million more. That represents a policy discussion about funding levels, but it is separate from the question of legal compliance.

In short, the Blueprint is the law and must be followed. St. Mary's County has demonstrated that it can meet those obligations, and through responsible planning, it has positioned itself ahead of projected requirements through 2032. The responsibility of the Commissioners is to continue working with the Board of Education to ensure those obligations are met in a responsible and sustainable way for both students and taxpayers.

**6. Please discuss your philosophy related to charter schools. Do you believe they should be expanded in our county public school structure?**

My philosophy on charter schools is that public education should provide high-quality opportunities for all students while ensuring strict accountability for taxpayer funds. Charter schools are still public schools, and when managed properly, they can encourage innovation, flexibility, and specialized programs that supplement rather than compete with traditional public schools.

Charter schools can act as testing grounds for new educational ideas, such as specialized academic programs, career and technical education, STEM projects, or partnerships with workforce and trades programs. In some communities, they offer families additional public education choices that better fit their children's needs.

That said, expansion should not happen just for the sake of growth. Any charter school operating within a county school system must adhere to the same standards for transparency, academic achievement, and financial responsibility as traditional public schools. It is also essential that charter programs improve the overall education system rather than divert resources in a way that undermines existing schools.

In Maryland, decisions about charter schools are mainly made by the local Board of Education, not the County Commissioners. The Board reviews proposals, grants charters, and manages their operation. The County Commissioners' primary role is to ensure that education funding, managed through the county budget, is handled responsibly.

Therefore, my goal as a County Commissioner is to ensure that any public education model in the county, whether traditional schools or charter programs, operates with high accountability, delivers measurable results for students, and uses taxpayer resources efficiently. If charter schools can prove they add value to the public education system while upholding these standards, they can be a helpful part of the broader educational landscape.

7. How will your budget address increased needs for mental health supports for students and educators in our community, where mental health access is so limited?

The premise of this question assumes that the County Commissioners decide which mental health programs are available in schools. In reality, these decisions mainly fall to the Board of Education and the Superintendent. They determine what mental health services are necessary, how programs are run, and staffing needs. Commissioners do not create these programs. Our role is to review and fund requests submitted through the school system as part of the annual budget process. If a program or expansion is not requested during this process, it cannot receive funding.

When making and supporting decisions in government, it is essential to distinguish between facts—what has already happened, and what is happening now—and opinions. It is also important to recognize the gap between a desire for more services and the actual need for them. Public policy and budgets should be based on measurable data and documented outcomes, not assumptions.

According to information from the St. Mary's County Health Department and existing school initiatives, the data does not necessarily indicate that the county currently lacks mental health services in schools. Recently, there has been a significant expansion of services through various channels. These include school-based health centers, counseling and behavioral health partnerships, coordinated programs with the Health Department, and direct access to mental health services within school health facilities.

Mental health services for students also extend beyond the classroom. County government supports behavioral health programs through the Health Department and community-based providers that work with families and students outside of school. Often, these partnerships offer broader access to care than what schools can provide alone.

If the Board of Education identifies additional needs and submits a request supported by data and measurable outcomes, that request will be evaluated through the normal budget process alongside other county priorities. Responsible budgeting requires supporting expansions based on evidence of need and sustainable funding.

Ultimately, promoting student well-being requires coordination among the Board of Education, the Health Department, the county government, and community partners. The role of the Commissioners is to ensure that resources are allocated responsibly and that existing programs continue to serve students and families effectively, all while maintaining fiscal responsibility to residents.

#### **8. What is your opinion on local efforts to create and support community schools?**

Community schools are often described as schools that serve as central hubs for services supporting students and families beyond traditional classroom teaching. These efforts usually involve collaborations with health providers, social service agencies, youth programs, and community organizations. When managed effectively, these partnerships can help tackle issues that influence a student's ability to succeed academically.

At the same time, it is important to understand where the authority for these programs truly resides. The structure, implementation, and operation of community school models are

determined by the Board of Education and the school system. County Commissioners do not establish those programs or decide how they operate within schools. Our role is more indirect and generally involves supporting the partner agencies that may participate in those services, such as the Health Department or other community-based providers.

In many ways, St. Mary's County already has several collaborative partnerships that embody the goals often linked to the community school model. The school system collaborates with the Health Department, social services, and various local organizations to support students and families in areas like healthcare access, counseling, and youth programs. Because of these existing partnerships, many elements typically associated with the community school framework are already present in our community.

When reviewing proposals to expand programs labeled as community schools, decision makers should prioritize outcomes and measurable impact over terminology. Programs need to show they are addressing specific needs and delivering positive results for students and families.

If the Board of Education proposes initiatives supported by data, demonstrating measurable benefits and financial sustainability, those proposals can be reviewed through the normal budget and partnership processes. At the same time, it remains essential for schools to keep their primary focus on education while working with community partners to address the broader needs of students.

Collaboration among schools, local government, and community organizations can be valuable when it is based on clear goals, measurable results, and responsible resource use. The goal should always be to improve opportunities for students while holding accountable the public funds supporting these efforts.

**9. SMCPS is in a period of enrollment decline. Our newest building is 10 years old. What should influence any decisions to redistrict?**

The way this question is framed combines several complex issues and incorrectly assigns responsibility to the County Commissioners that does not actually exist within Maryland's education governance structure. Decisions about school boundaries and redistricting fall under the authority of the Board of Education and the Superintendent. The Commissioners do not draw district lines, determine enrollment assignments, or oversee daily operations of the school system. Those responsibilities belong to the school system leadership.

This point was clearly reinforced in the recent Facility Utilization and School Boundary Study presentation given to the Board of Education. That study examined enrollment trends, building capacity, facility utilization, transportation impacts, housing development patterns, and long-term demographic projections. The consultants outlined several potential options for the Board to consider, including boundary adjustments, monitoring enrollment trends over multiple years, and assessing facility utilization levels if enrollment declines continue. The study emphasized that

decisions about redistricting must be based on data such as enrollment projections, classroom capacity, program availability, transportation logistics, and community input.

It is also important to put the discussion about the facility into perspective. A school building that is ten years old is still considered relatively new in terms of public infrastructure. School facilities are built to last for many decades and typically undergo renovations and modernization as part of regular capital improvement efforts. In St. Mary's County, several schools have already been renovated or upgraded through the capital planning process, which is a key part of responsible long-term infrastructure management.

Where the County Commissioners intersect with these issues is through funding. Capital construction, renovations, and operating budgets are supported by county appropriations based on requests from the school system. As the recent study clarified, facility utilization and enrollment trends can influence capital planning and future funding needs. If enrollment shifts significantly or facilities become underused, the school system may adjust its capital priorities, and those requests then go before the Commissioners through the budget and capital improvement program process.

Declining enrollment, facility utilization, classroom capacity, and state funding formulas are all interconnected. Enrollment levels influence state education funding and staffing decisions. Facility utilization affects long-term capital planning. Classroom capacity determines staffing needs and how programs are delivered. These are complex issues that require careful analysis and long-term planning by the Board of Education.

The role of the Commissioners is to evaluate funding requests related to those needs and ensure that the county's financial resources are allocated responsibly while supporting the priorities set by the school system. However, redistricting itself remains a decision that properly belongs to the Board of Education after reviewing the detailed analysis presented in the recent redistricting and facility utilization study.

In summary, any redistricting decision should be based on enrollment data, facility utilization, transportation considerations, community input, and the long-term capital plan for school facilities. The Commissioners' role is to ensure that the funding mechanisms supporting those decisions remain responsible, sustainable, and aligned with the needs identified by the school system.

### **Public Funding for Private Schools:**

#### **10. Do you support or oppose allocating public funding to non-public school students through voucher programs?**

I support parental choice in education. Parents should have the ability to select the educational setting that best fits their child's needs, whether that is a public school, charter school, private school, religious school, or homeschooling. Every student learns differently, and families should have meaningful options regarding their child's education.

School choice programs, like vouchers or similar options, aim to give families more flexibility and access to opportunities that might not be available in every traditional school. When set up correctly, these programs can create more opportunities for students while encouraging innovation and growth across the entire education system.

That said, programs involving vouchers or education savings accounts are created and managed at the state level through the Maryland General Assembly. County Commissioners do not establish or oversee these programs, nor do we influence how they are structured. These policy decisions are made by the state.

From the county government's perspective, our duty is to fund the public school system responsibly and in line with state law. Public schools educate the majority of students in our community and will always be the cornerstone of our education system.

Supporting school choice does not imply weakening public education. It means acknowledging that families deserve options and that education policy should prioritize creating opportunities for students instead of restricting them to one model.

Ultimately, strong public schools and parental choice are not mutually exclusive. Both can coexist as part of a broader education system that focuses on student success and values families' decision-making in their children's education.

**11. Do you support or oppose allowing non-public school students to participate in public school extracurricular activities (sports, clubs, etc.)?**

I fully support allowing students from non-public schools, including homeschooled students, to participate in public school extracurricular activities. The main purpose of a public school system is to serve the children of the community. Families who choose private or homeschool education still pay the same property taxes and other local taxes that fund public schools. They also contribute financially to the facilities, fields, programs, and resources that support these activities.

If parents are required to fund the system through their taxes, they should not be barred from reasonable access to the opportunities these resources provide. The idea that a child could be prevented from participating in extracurricular programs funded partly by their own family's taxes does not align with the broader mission of serving all children in the community.

Extracurricular activities like sports, clubs, and academic programs help build leadership, teamwork, discipline, and community involvement. These opportunities benefit young people whether their education occurs in a public school, private school, or homeschool.

Of course, participation should still adhere to clear rules to ensure fairness and accountability, including residency requirements, academic eligibility standards, and program capacity. These safeguards maintain the integrity of the programs while still allowing access for students whose families support the system through their taxes.

In short, the purpose of the public school system should be to support every child in the community. Parents who fund that system through taxes should not have their children excluded from programs that those tax dollars help create.

### **Collective Bargaining:**

#### **12. Do you support or oppose school employees gaining the right to strike?**

I do not support granting school employees the right to strike. Public education is an essential public service, and the primary responsibility of the school system is to ensure that students receive consistent and uninterrupted instruction. When strikes occur, it is ultimately students and families who bear the consequences, including lost instructional time, disrupted schedules, and classroom uncertainty.

That does not mean educators and school employees should not have a strong voice in their working conditions, compensation, and professional environment. Teachers and school staff play a critical role in our students' success and deserve to be treated with respect and fairness. Maryland already provides mechanisms, such as collective bargaining, negotiation, and mediation, that enable employees and school systems to resolve disputes and reach agreements.

In most cases, successful outcomes are achieved through good-faith negotiations among the Board of Education, the Superintendent, and employee organizations. Those discussions can be challenging at times, but they should remain focused on collaboration and solutions rather than on actions that interrupt students' education.

Education is too important to place students in the middle of labor disputes. Protecting the continuity of learning while ensuring educators are heard and respected is the better path forward.

#### **13. What is your understanding of the nature of the relationship between the Board of Education, Superintendent, county government, and union as it relates to negotiations, budget development, and administration of schools? How do you see yourself utilizing the power of your office in working within this structure?**

The structure of Maryland's education governance is fairly clear, and each entity has a distinct role. The Board of Education and the Superintendent are responsible for the administration and operation of the school system. They manage personnel, determine staffing needs, oversee daily operations, and negotiate collective bargaining agreements with employee unions representing teachers and school staff. Those negotiations occur between the Board of Education, the Superintendent, and the unions.

County government plays a different role. The County Commissioners do not negotiate labor contracts, manage school employees, or operate the school system. Our responsibility is to review and approve the funding that supports the school system through the county budget while complying with state requirements such as Maintenance of Effort and other education funding mandates.

The process often becomes difficult when these responsibilities are not coordinated early enough. Over the past several years, coordination has not always occurred in a productive way. The reality is that the school system often develops forecasts and enters into contract negotiations based on projected growth and anticipated funding levels. However, those negotiations sometimes involve financial commitments tied to funding sources that the school system itself does not control.

When that happens, the responsibility shifts to the County Commissioners to try to fund agreements that were negotiated using dollars that may not actually exist within the county's fiscal capacity. That situation can create unnecessary tension between the Board of Education and county government because the Commissioners are then asked to fund commitments negotiated without a full understanding of the county's budget realities.

There is a better way to handle this process. Prior to entering into contract negotiations, there should be direct conversations between the Board of Education and the County Commissioners regarding the county's financial outlook. The school system prepares its forecasts, but the county also has its own revenue projections, fiscal constraints, and obligations across all departments. Those realities should be clearly communicated before negotiations begin.

Some elements of negotiations are set by law or existing agreements, while others are open for discussion. What should never be unclear is the financial environment in which those negotiations occur. If everyone at the table understands the fiscal boundaries from the start, it prevents unrealistic expectations and helps avoid situations where promises are made with funds that may not actually be available.

Using the authority of my office involves promoting open communication and transparency. Budget realities should be openly discussed before negotiations start so that everyone understands the available resources. If the county won't raise taxes, that should be clearly stated at the beginning of the process to ensure negotiations stay within the actual fiscal framework.

When all parties share the same financial understanding, negotiations become much more productive, and the relationship between the Board of Education and county government becomes significantly less contentious. Ultimately, the goal should be to support educators, maintain responsible budgets, and ensure that agreements reached are sustainable for the long term.

**14. Do you commit to meeting with union leadership to talk about the needs facing our schools (including salary and staffing levels) and the revenue or other budget actions necessary to meet those needs?**

Yes, I believe in open communication with all stakeholders, including educators and organizations that represent them. Teachers and school staff work directly with our students every day, and listening to their perspectives on the challenges facing our schools can be valuable.

At the same time, it is important to respect the way these decisions are made. Collective bargaining negotiations take place between the Board of Education, the Superintendent, and the employee unions. County Commissioners are not parties to those negotiations and should not interfere in that process. The role of the Commissioners is to review and approve funding through the county budget, not to negotiate contracts.

If meetings with union leadership occur, they should be viewed as opportunities for understanding rather than negotiations. I would ensure that those discussions include appropriate participants, such as county staff and, when relevant, individuals with a direct role in the process, like representatives from the school system or the Board of Education. The goal is to make sure everyone involved has the same understanding of the issues and the financial realities.

These meetings should never turn into a “he said, she said” situation where a conversation is later seen as a commitment from a single commissioner. Any budget decision ultimately requires action by the full Board of County Commissioners as a governing body. Individual commissioners cannot make funding commitments on behalf of the entire board.

The purpose of these conversations should be to share information, ensure that all parties understand the financial limitations and operational realities involved, and find areas where common ground may exist. Constructive dialogue can help push issues forward in a positive and responsible way, while still honoring the legal roles and responsibilities of each entity involved.

#### **Racial and Social Justice:**

**15. EASMC supports honesty in education. To encourage critical thinking within our classrooms, we believe educators should have professional autonomy on how to implement curriculum to meet the needs of our students. Do you support or oppose this position? How would you respond to political pressure threatening that professional autonomy?**

The implementation of curriculum and classroom instruction is an operational responsibility of the school system. Decisions regarding curriculum, instructional methods, and how educators implement those standards fall under the authority of the Board of Education and the Superintendent, not the County Commissioners. These decisions are guided by state curriculum frameworks, local Board of Education policy, and the professional leadership of the school system.

Because of that structure, this is not an area where a County Commissioner has direct authority or oversight. Commissioners do not determine curriculum content, instructional approaches, or classroom policies.

From the perspective of county governance, I can say that schools function best when educators are able to perform their duties professionally within the framework established by the Board of Education and state education standards. Teachers should be able to focus on educating students, encouraging critical thinking, and supporting academic success while operating within those established guidelines.

At the same time, public education systems must remain accountable to the communities they serve. Parents, educators, administrators, and school boards all play roles in shaping the educational environment through policies and processes within the school system.

Ultimately, discussions about curriculum and instructional autonomy should occur within the Board of Education and the policies that govern the school system. The role of the County Commissioners is to support the educational system through responsible funding and collaboration while respecting the operational authority of the Board of Education and school leadership.

16. Do you support or oppose a curriculum that reflects the perspective and background of diverse learners? How would you respond to political pressure requesting changes to content and curriculum?

The term “diverse learners” can mean many different things depending on how it is used. In fact, every child learns differently. Students come from various families, backgrounds, and experiences, and effective educators already understand this and adjust their teaching within the established curriculum standards.

What concerns me most about this issue is the growing trend to politicize education. I do not support the politicization of these matters. Our children should not be used as political tools, and curriculum decisions should not be made in a way that turns student education into a political debate. The goal of a curriculum is to educate and develop our children, not to promote political viewpoints.

It is also crucial to understand where authority for these decisions truly resides. Curriculum standards and requirements are set at the state level through the Maryland State Department of Education, the State Board of Education, and state law. Local school systems operate within these mandates. The Board of Education and the Superintendent are responsible for implementing those standards and managing the educational program within the school system.

County Commissioners do not decide on curriculum content, instructional materials, or classroom teaching. Therefore, any opinion a County Commissioner might give on specific curriculum issues has no direct role in operations and could unnecessarily politicize students' education.

The focus should stay on ensuring students get a quality education, that educators have the support to teach effectively within the framework set by the state, and that schools focus on preparing students for success in their future rather than becoming centers for political conflicts.

17. What specific policy goals and objectives will you pursue aimed at addressing racial and social justice, including support of diversity, equity, and inclusion for all students and providing equitable access, opportunities, resources, and supports?

The language in this question reflects a policy debate that has become increasingly political, and I believe it is important to approach it carefully. Students should not be caught in the middle of

political arguments. The main purpose of our schools is education. Our focus should stay on making sure every student gets a strong academic foundation that prepares them for the future.

It is also important to understand the difference between equality and equity. Equality means giving every student the same opportunity to succeed. Equity, as often discussed in policy debates, can involve allocating resources or outcomes differently based on specific needs. These are policy issues that are usually addressed at the state level through legislation and education policy, not by a County Commissioner's office.

From a governance perspective, the County Commissioners do not oversee the daily operations of the school system. Matters related to inclusion within classrooms, program participation, and student support services are the responsibility of the Board of Education, the Superintendent, school administrators, and educators who manage those systems directly.

If students are not being included in programs or opportunities within the school system, it is a management and operational issue that must be addressed by the school itself. The role of county government is not to interfere with these operational decisions.

My focus as a County Commissioner would be ensuring that the school system has the resources necessary to educate all students and that those resources are managed responsibly. Every student in our community deserves access to quality education, strong teachers, and safe learning environments. Achieving that goal requires collaboration between the Board of Education, educators, families, and the broader community while keeping the focus where it belongs—on educating our children rather than turning the classroom into a venue for political debates.

**18. Immigration enforcement is a matter of federal jurisdiction. What is your position on how local law enforcement should interact with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement? And how will you work to ensure school grounds, bus stops, and other school spaces are safe havens against immigration enforcement actions?**

Immigration enforcement is primarily a federal responsibility, with agencies like U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) tasked with enforcing federal immigration laws. Local governments should not interfere with lawful federal enforcement efforts. I oppose policies that create sanctuary jurisdictions, "safe havens," or other local restrictions that hinder cooperation with federal law enforcement. Laws should be applied uniformly, and public policy should not selectively ignore or obstruct federal law.

People in the country illegally can access legal pathways to gain lawful status. Entering or staying in the country against immigration law is a violation of federal law, and local policies should not promote or protect that behavior. Communities work best when laws are respected and enforced fairly.

I support lawful cooperation between local law enforcement and federal authorities, including the use of tools such as 287(g) agreements that enable trained local officers to work with federal immigration enforcement when appropriate. Cooperative agreements can help ensure that serious criminal offenders in the country illegally are identified and processed properly through the legal system.

At the same time, it is important to recognize the limits of local authority. School operations and policies related to students fall under the school system and the Board of Education, not the County Commissioners. The role of county government is not to designate schools or other public spaces as immigration enforcement zones or non-enforcement zones. Those types of policies are matters of federal law and federal agency policy.

My focus as a County Commissioner would be to ensure that local government operates within the law, that our law enforcement agencies can cooperate properly with federal partners, and that taxpayer resources are used responsibly to serve our residents. Public policy should emphasize lawful governance, community safety, and respect for the rule of law, while making sure that local government remains centered on its core responsibilities.

Even the way this question is framed creates a very biased setup for the person answering. It suggests that unless someone supports the idea of “safe havens,” they must support immigration agents storming schools or appearing at bus stops to detain children. That portrayal simply does not match the reality most Americans face. It offers a false choice in a politically charged atmosphere where disagreement with sanctuary policies can be unfairly labeled as extreme or unreasonable. Honestly, that story is mainly driven by political messaging and media framing rather than what actually happens across the United States. Serious public policy debates should be based on facts and responsible governance, not on hypothetical scenarios designed to force a specific answer. We are a nation of laws, not men. Rather than creating a policy that conflicts with a law, the advocacy should be on the law itself, with the respective lawmakers to adjust, change, or keep the laws that they legislated.

**19. Stable, safe, and affordable housing is necessary for all students to be able to succeed in school and in the recruitment of educators, including education support professionals, to live in the communities they serve. How do you plan to address the housing crisis in the county?**

Stable, safe, and affordable housing are vital for families, students, teachers, and support staff, but this question needs to be framed more carefully. Affordable housing and subsidized housing are not the same, and I do not support treating them as interchangeable. Under Maryland law, “affordable” housing means housing costs that do not exceed 30% of a household’s income. The 2025 state and HUD income tables list St. Mary’s County area median income at \$128,800 for a four-person household, with moderate income at 80% of AMI and lower affordability bands below that.

Applying that standard to our own school workforce is essential. Under the current St. Mary's County Public Schools salary schedule, a 10-month teacher at Step A earns \$53,500 with a conditional certificate, \$60,500 with a standard professional certificate, and \$64,500 with a master's degree. Using the 30% affordability benchmark, that equates to a monthly housing budget of about \$1,338, \$1,513, and \$1,613 respectively. HUD's 2025 HOME rent limits for St. Mary's County show one-bedroom and two-bedroom affordability thresholds in roughly that range, indicating the problem isn't that affordable housing doesn't exist, but whether enough attainable options are available across different price points and family sizes.

The county also clearly has homes for sale below luxury price levels. Current listings show many homes in St. Mary's County priced under \$350,000, which challenges the idea that all affordable ownership options have vanished. At the same time, housing costs are still being driven up by interest rates, inflation, insurance, labor, and material costs, all of which are influenced much more by the national economy than by county government. County Commissioners do not control mortgage rates, national inflation, global supply chains, or fuel prices, all of which directly affect the cost of building and owning a home.

What the local government should do is stop making the problem worse. One of the best ways to improve affordability is to cut unnecessary regulations and local cost drivers so builders can produce homes at lower prices. At the county level, that also means examining taxes and fees that add to the cost of housing. The County is still dealing with its building excise tax structure, and such a policy definitely affects affordability. If you want housing to be more affordable, you shouldn't keep adding costs at the local level and then be surprised when working families struggle to buy or rent.

I also believe this question overemphasizes one aspect of the problem while obscuring another. St. Mary's County is already among the safer counties in Maryland, so the issue here isn't whether housing is "safe" in the political sense often implied by that phrase. The real question is whether housing is attainable for working families. My stance is that the solution isn't more subsidized housing policies at the county level. Instead, it's supporting attainable housing by lowering barriers to construction, reducing unnecessary taxes and fees, and putting more money back into residents' pockets so they can afford mortgages, rent, utilities, and overall ownership costs. Affordable housing is about affordability, and that begins with easing the financial burden, not increasing dependence.

### **Privatization and Support for Education Support Professionals (ESP's):**

#### **20. Are you in favor of contracting out custodial, cafeteria, and maintenance services rather than have those services provided by the Board of Education employees?**

My understanding is that this question is often framed more as a labor or union issue than as a governance or fiscal policy issue. In reality, the decision to provide those services through school system employees or through contracted vendors is an operational choice that falls under the authority of the Board of Education and the Superintendent, not the County Commissioners.

The Board of Education oversees school system personnel, determines staffing models, and makes decisions on how operational services like custodial work, food service, and maintenance are provided. These decisions are based on operational efficiency, workforce management, and the needs of the school system. County Commissioners do not control those operational decisions.

From the county government's perspective, the Commissioners' responsibility is to review and approve the overall education budget while ensuring compliance with state funding requirements and maintaining fiscal responsibility to taxpayers. My role is not to determine who is part of a union or not, nor is it to decide whether a specific operational service should be performed by employees or outside contractors.

What matters is whether the school system is functioning efficiently and using its resources responsibly. If the Board of Education decides that contracting certain services offers better value and allows more resources to go toward classroom instruction and student support, that's their decision to make. If they find that keeping those services in-house is more effective, that also falls within their authority.

Ultimately, my focus as a County Commissioner is on responsible budgeting and making sure the education system is funded appropriately within the county's fiscal limits. Decisions about staffing structures and service delivery models are operational issues that rightfully fall under the authority of the Board of Education.

**21. Too many ESPs work second jobs and struggle to provide for their families, buy homes, save for their futures, and afford community or four-year college tuition for their children to learn a trade and plan a career. The looming threats of privatization by school districts, which would import even lower-paid workers from outside areas, risk the stability of schools and communities and further undermine the value of ESPs and their jobs.**

ESPs across the state are organizing to build presence, strength, and power in a campaign centered on a bill of rights that addresses long-standing issues troubling these dedicated employees. These issues now threaten both the recruitment of new employees and the retention of veteran staff. You can read about the [ESP Bill of Rights here](#).

Education Support Professionals are a vital part of the school system. Custodians, cafeteria workers, maintenance staff, paraprofessionals, transportation employees, and other support personnel help keep schools running smoothly each day, and they deserve to work in a safe, respectful, and productive environment. Any effort that recognizes the importance of this workforce and promotes constructive dialogue about working conditions is worth considering.

That said, it is crucial to keep the roles of each governing body clear. Matters such as job classifications, compensation structures, staffing levels, and workplace policies are determined by the Board of Education and school system leadership through their operational management and collective bargaining processes. These positions are defined based on the nature of the work performed, the responsibilities of the role, and the broader labor market.

From the perspective of a County Commissioner, the main connection to these issues is financial. The Commissioners' role is to review and approve the education budget according to the requirements set by state law and within the overall fiscal capacity of the county. We are not involved in negotiating labor agreements or deciding the structure of the school system workforce.

Any proposal with fiscal implications ultimately becomes part of the larger budget discussion. When those requests are made, they must be evaluated alongside all other county commitments and within the limits of what taxpayers can reasonably support. The goal should always be to ensure that the school system is funded responsibly while preserving long-term financial stability for the entire county.

**22. Please share how you would use your office to help make the ESP Bill of Rights a reality in the county.**

The ESP Bill of Rights outlines several goals concerning working conditions, pay, and recognition for education support professionals. Many of these issues involve employment policies, staffing arrangements, and collective bargaining matters that fall directly under the authority of the Board of Education and the Superintendent. These operational decisions are negotiated between the school system and employee organizations representing the workers.

From a County Commissioner's perspective, my role mainly intersects with these issues through the budget process. Commissioners are responsible for funding the school system according to state law and within the county's fiscal capacity. We do not negotiate labor agreements or set the employment terms for school staff.

What I can do is ensure that budget discussions stay transparent, grounded in fiscal reality, and focused on supporting the overall operation of the school system. If the Board of Education submits funding requests related to workforce needs or operational priorities, those requests can be evaluated as part of the broader budget process alongside other county responsibilities.

Ultimately, turning elements of any workforce framework into reality depends on the decisions made by the Board of Education through its management and negotiation processes. My role is to ensure that the county's financial decisions promote the long-term stability of the education system while responsibly managing taxpayer resources.

## Essay Questions:

### **A. Why are you running for this position? What personal attributes, characteristics, and experiences make you the right candidate for this position?**

I am running for County Commissioner because I believe the citizens of this county deserve responsible leadership, fiscal discipline, and a government that respects both the taxpayers who fund it and the employees who serve this community every day. Having previously served in elected office, I understand the complexity of governing and the responsibility that comes with making decisions that affect thousands of residents.

My leadership experience is based on practical governance, teamwork, and a dedication to fiscal responsibility. Local government must operate within its means while still providing essential services. That involves maintaining a balanced approach to budgeting, managing spending wisely, and regularly assessing the size and scope of county government to ensure efficiency. One of my main goals is to lower the tax burden on county residents. Government should be good stewards of taxpayer dollars, ensuring every dollar is spent responsibly and targeted toward genuine community needs.

Public safety is a fundamental aspect of effective local government. Our law enforcement officers, emergency medical services personnel, firefighters, and other first responders are responsible for protecting our community daily. Making sure these systems are properly staffed, funded, and supported—especially our EMS system—is crucial to ensuring the safety and well-being of our residents.

At the same time, county government must support all of its departments and employees fairly. Our parks and recreation programs, public works staff, educators, and many others contribute to the quality of life that makes this county such a great place to live. They deserve leadership that respects their roles and works collaboratively rather than creating unnecessary conflict.

One of the main reasons I chose to run again is what I have seen over the past four years. The budget process should be a professional and collaborative effort aimed at solving community problems. Instead, we have occasionally witnessed unnecessary hostility, strained relationships with key partners like the Board of Education, and a pattern of decision-making that has made many departments feel marginalized or ignored. Such an approach does not advance a community.

At the same time, residents have experienced significant tax hikes without clear benefits to justify the extra burden on working families. Fiscal policy should be deliberate, balanced, and aimed at long-term sustainability, not impulsive decisions that cause instability or frustration for taxpayers.

Ultimately, I am running because I believe this county deserves better. We need leadership that prioritizes responsible budgeting, respectful collaboration, and long-term planning over short-term politics. My experience in government, my commitment to fiscal responsibility, and my dedication to the people of this county motivate me to step forward and seek this position once

again. The goal is simple: restore stability, strengthen our public services, and ensure that county government works for the people it serves.

**B. What are the top three things you would like to accomplish in the next four years if you are elected to [county commission/BOE]?**

If elected, I will focus on several priorities over the next four years. However, it is also important to understand that priorities may change based on economic conditions, state mandates, and the community's changing needs. Responsible leadership requires adaptability, but I believe there are key goals that are vital for the future of this community.

First, I want to focus on making life more affordable for the citizens of this county. Over the past several years, the cost of living has risen dramatically, while local taxes and fees have also increased. My goal is to lower the tax burden where possible, while still ensuring that the county provides effective and reliable services. This requires careful budgeting, cutting unnecessary spending, and making sure that taxpayer dollars are focused on real priorities instead of expanding government just for the sake of growth.

Second, I believe we need to reevaluate the size and structure of county government. A leaner, more efficient government allows resources to be directed where they are truly needed. That includes pushing back on unfunded mandates from the State of Maryland that shift financial responsibility onto local governments without providing the necessary funding to support those requirements. Local tax dollars should primarily support local services that benefit our residents rather than being consumed by state-driven mandates.

Third, I want to focus on long-term planning for community quality of life and infrastructure. This includes expanding and improving parks and recreation services as our county continues to grow, ensuring that our capital improvement projects are well managed, and allocating resources to projects that provide real value to the community. Proper oversight of capital projects is essential so that taxpayer funds are used efficiently and projects are completed responsibly.

At the core of these priorities is the need to restore professionalism and civility in county government operations. Honest and direct conversations are essential in government, and difficult issues should never be avoided. However, there's a difference between being direct and being disrespectful. The working relationships among the Commissioners, the Board of Education, county departments, and community partners must be professional and collaborative if we want to address the complex challenges facing our county.

Ultimately, the goal is simple: make life more affordable for our residents, ensure that government operates efficiently and responsibly, and build a county government that works collaboratively to serve the people of this community.

**Additional Information:**

**Along with this completed questionnaire, please provide an up-to-date bio or resume as well as a current list of endorsements for this election cycle.**

John E. O'Connor is a highly decorated U.S. Army veteran, community leader, and public servant with over 25 years of experience in federal, county, and municipal government, and served on the St Mary's Board of Commissioners from 2014-2022. A Purple Heart recipient and recipient of the Army Commendation Medal with Valor Device for heroic actions in combat while under direct enemy fire during service in Iraq, O'Connor has dedicated his life to service first in uniform defending the nation and supporting peacekeeping operations abroad, and now in public life working to strengthen the communities he calls home. He also served in Kosovo as part of a U.S. peacekeeping mission supporting stability operations in the region.

Throughout his career, O'Connor has earned a reputation for principled leadership, fiscal responsibility, and a deep understanding of how government can and should serve the people. His experience covers more than two decades in federal, county, and municipal governance, including work in public policy, municipal administration, capital planning, grant development, and strategic program management. He has collaborated closely with local leaders, county officials, and state and federal partners to advance initiatives that improve infrastructure, strengthen communities, and responsibly manage public resources.

O'Connor is well known for his skill in navigating complex government systems and achieving meaningful results for local communities. His work helping municipalities find and secure state and federal funding has supported projects such as infrastructure improvements, environmental sustainability efforts, youth programs, and community development initiatives. His governance approach highlights accountability, transparency, and the belief that taxpayer dollars must always be managed with discipline and respect.

Besides his professional work in government administration and policy, O'Connor has held elected office, where he gained a reputation for thoughtful leadership, balanced decision-making, and honest, straightforward communication with the public. His government experience has given him a practical understanding of the tough choices leaders face and the importance of long-term planning, responsible budgeting, and teamwork among government partners.

O'Connor's academic background includes higher education in leadership and public service, including graduate studies at Johns Hopkins University. His academic training complements decades of real-world experience working within the complexities of modern government and public administration.

Beyond government service, O'Connor is deeply dedicated to mentorship and youth development in his community. He coaches youth lacrosse in St. Mary's County, volunteers with youth hockey programs, and serves as an ice hockey official. Through athletics, he helps young

athletes build discipline, teamwork, and leadership values that he considers vital for strengthening communities and preparing the next generation for success.

O'Connor is also a small business owner and licensed private pilot, experiences that provide him with additional perspective on the challenges faced by working families, entrepreneurs, and small businesses.

He lives in Mechanicsville, Maryland, with his wife Elizabeth and their son, John Edward II. In his free time, O'Connor enjoys scuba diving and outdoor activities with family and friends. Whether through public service, community leadership, or mentoring young people, he remains dedicated to strengthening the institutions that support vibrant communities and ensuring that government functions with integrity, responsibility, and a consistent focus on the people it serves.