

Candidate Information

1. First name * Rishi
2. Last name* Bagga
3. Campaign Website* www.rishibagga.com
4. Campaign Facebook * <https://www.facebook.com/baggaforflorida>
5. Campaign Twitter* @BaggaForFlorida
6. Campaign Instagram * @BaggaForFlorida
7. Please list the LGBTQ+ organizations you are affiliated with and any donations you have given. *

I make annual contributions at varying levels to Equality Florida.

8. Please summarize your history of community involvement. This may include city boards, civic associations, non-profits, etc. *

I currently sit on the 2024 Orange County Charter Review Commission as a representative for District 4.

I am a member of the Dean's Advisory Counsel for the UCF College of Sciences as well as the UCF India Center.

I am a current member of the South Asian Bar Association of North America, an affinity/minority bar association of about 10,000 lawyers across the U.S. and Canada; I served as its President between 2017-2018 and currently serve on its National Advisory Council.

I am a founding board member and the Orange County Caucus Chair of the South Asian American/ AAPI Democratic Caucus in the Florida Democratic Party.

I am a 2018 graduate of the Orlando Economic Partnership's Central Florida Political Leadership Institute. I began my career serving the State of Florida as a prosecutor in Miami-Dade County. I have also previously served as a volunteer mediator for the Ninth Judicial Circuit of Florida's Dispute Resolution Program.

9. Please summarize the work you have performed in the past five years to further LGBTQ+ rights.*

Last year, I ran for State Representative in District 35 and was proud to be the Democratic Nominee. In this capacity, I centered LGBTQ+ rights in my platform and was an outspoken advocate against legislative efforts that attacked LGBTQ+ Floridians.

Prior to this, I have been an outspoken advocate for diversity and inclusion within the legal profession, including the LGBTQ+ legal community, as President of SABA North America from 2017-2018. I further advocated for inclusion of Indian American members of the LGBTQ+ community while in this position and in my other advocacy work within the Indian American community.

Finally, I have also been a supporter of and have donated to Equality Florida.

10. Please list other endorsements you have received. *

At present, our campaign has been endorsed by Rep. Carlos Guillermo Smith, the Democratic Progressive Caucus of Florida, the Florida Asian American Justice Alliance, Indian American Impact Fund, and the Asian American Restaurant Alliance. While not an endorsement, our campaign has received the Gun Sense Candidate distinction from Moms Demand Action. We anticipate further endorsements in the coming days.

About Your Campaign and LGBTQ Issues

11. What motivated you to run for this position?*

I have two primary motivations for running for this position. First, I strongly disagree with the policy direction of our state legislature and believe that new voices and leadership are sorely needed in Tallahassee. Second, there is an absence of any leadership or representation in Tallahassee for AAPI Floridians, and I believe that it is vital that there be AAPI representation in our legislature to build a bridge between these communities and our state government.

I first became interested in running for the state legislature after observing the legislature's lack of meaningful action to address the rise of gun violence and hate after the horrific mass shootings at Pulse and Parkland. As a former prosecutor, I handled numerous domestic violence and gun violence cases, and became frustrated by policies that put more guns in the wrong hands.

As an outspoken advocate for diversity and equity in our legal and educational institutions, I have been incredibly dismayed by the legislature's actions to eliminate the necessary dialogue in our schools and other institutions regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion. And bills such as "Don't Say Gay" and "Stop Woke" have turned these institutions into unwelcome and unsafe spaces for so many minority and LGBTQ+ communities. It is vital that we fight back against these damaging policies, and observing the tide of hateful and hurtful legislation passed by the legislature further strengthened my resolve to run for this office.

There are countless other issues that have motivated me, but in all, I strongly believe that our state needs new leadership and new leaders and candidates to step forward. Last year, I was honored to serve as the nominee for the Democratic Party for this position. In that capacity, I was able to build a campaign that started from a small husband-and-wife operation to one that ultimately won the primary and received over 26,000 votes in the district. Accordingly, when the Republican incumbent resigned, I decided to run again to build upon the momentum we had built last year and to finish the job.

12. What does being an ally or advocate for the LGBTQ+ community mean to you?*

An ally does more than simply accept members of the LGBTQ+ community; an ally commits themselves to actively working towards equality for members of the LGBTQ+ community. This means educating themselves on issues facing the LGBTQ+ community, standing up against policies and laws that negatively impact the LGBTQ+ community, and actively working to create safe and welcoming spaces for members of the LGBTQ+ community in other communities, such as in racial, religious, and professional communities. An ally makes sure that LGBTQ+ Americans are heard, included, protected, and represented.

13. Have you attended an LGBTQ+ Pride Month celebration or Orlando's Come Out With Pride? *

Yes

14. Have you attended or supported a drag show or drag performance in our community? *

Yes

15. How would you ensure that your office acknowledges and celebrates the LGBTQ+ community?*

Outward acknowledgement of and involvement in the LGBTQ+ community would, of course, be important for our office, such as attendance and involvement in important community events and initiatives. But beyond this, I would work to make sure that LGBTQ+ community leaders, members, and constituents would have an open line of communication to our office and staff. I would want our office to always be aware of and to understand important issues facing the community, including the impact of current or proposed legislation. I would endeavor for the LGBTQ+ community to be a trusted partner of our office so that together we can work to make sure the community thrives.

16. Will you ensure that you and your staff receive competency training on the LGBTQ+ community, emphasizing unconscious bias?*

Yes

17. Would you condemn instances of hate speech in your organization and the community at large? *

Yes

18. Legislation from Tallahassee has caused a sharp increase in discrimination and violence against the LGBTQ+ community in Orange County. How would you go about reducing discrimination in your District or local community? *

To be clear, I strongly oppose anti-LGBTQ+ legislation passed by the legislature, and if elected, I would work hard to repeal or reduce the impact of the numerous pieces of harmful legislation that has attacked

the community in the past few sessions. Beyond legislative action, elected officials can play an important role in centering LGBTQ+ issues. I would use my platform as an elected official to bring visibility to members of the community, advocate for passing and strengthening anti-discrimination and hate crime laws, and ensure that programs that assist the LGBTQ+ community are adequately funded. Outside of government action and with a platform afforded to an elected representative, I would always seek to be an advocate for inclusion and would endeavor to actively combat discrimination in our society and institutions.

19. There is a lack of knowledge when it comes to the transgender community. Sometimes, the services offered in public offices are often unfamiliar with the needs of the transgender community. What actions would you take to ensure that the services your office provides will be cognizant of the needs of the transgender community? *

I am personally committed to ensuring that the needs of the transgendered community are met and that we are fully inclusive of this population. I am also personally committed to becoming better educated on the issues and needs of the transgendered community, and if elected, I would ensure that members of my staff are educated on these issues as well. Finally, I would also ensure that my office and I work closely with members of the transgendered community to ensure we are being responsive to their needs and understood that they have a friend and ally.

To provide a small example of my commitment and approach, last year during my campaign, a transgendered resident and voter in our district brought to my attention that our campaign had employed some dated terminology to refer to transgendered individuals in one or two of our social media posts created by a staff member. When brought to my attention, I worked closely with the voter to not only correct our usage immediately, but also worked to ensure that both I and the staff member understood the history of the terms used, understood the correct usage, and gained an understanding of its importance. This interaction allowed me to learn more regarding the issues facing the community, and in my building trust with and even stronger support from the voter.

20. During a town hall in your District, a constituent describes being gay or transgender disparagingly. How would you constructively respond in this situation? *

It is important to address this sort of disparagement immediately, as allowing such commentary to persist only furthers this type of commentary. I do think it is important to do this in a constructive manner, as doing so in a belligerent one can act to harden misconceptions. I would generally seek to correct the constituent, explain why they are incorrect, and encourage them to learn more about the situation for reputable sources. It would be my aim to make sure that individuals who express prejudice or hate are responded to in a manner that emphasizes our common humanity and not further propagate hate.

21. How would you respond to a person intentionally misgendering a transgender or non-binary person? *

Again, this type of action is wrong and must be immediately addressed. In this situation, in addition to calling the behavior out, I would act to acknowledge the transgendered or non-binary person.

22. Orange County continues to embrace urban sprawl despite a plethora of data that links urban sprawl to severe strains on our housing, employment, healthcare, and public transit systems (to name a few). What are your thoughts on Orange County's growth?*

While growth and development are realities in Orange County, we must encourage developing "up" instead of "out", ensure that we encourage redevelopment of underutilized land and infill in our urban core rather than undeveloped land in our rural areas, act to protect environmentally sensitive land, preserve our natural spaces, ensure that development does not result in the increased risk of flooding, prioritize multifamily and affordable housing above single-family housing, and ensure that there are reliable public transportation links throughout our urban area.

23. To expand upon the prior statement, what could Orange County do regarding development that would better serve the communities in your District? *

As a member of the 2024 Charter Review Commission, I have been working with other members of the commission on several proposals that I believe are in line with these priorities, such as considering the adoption of a charter-level urban/rural boundary, working to guarantee long-term funding for the county's affordable housing fund, and other such priorities.

State House Questions

24. Will you support/co-sponsor legislation to make it illegal to fire someone, deny them housing, or reject their access to public accommodations because of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or expression? *

Yes

25. Will you support legislation requiring fair and equal access to essential healthcare for transgender persons? *

Yes

26. Would you oppose any and all legislation that criminalizes the medical treatment of transgender youth? If not, why?*

Yes

27. Will you oppose using taxpayer dollars to subsidize private and charter schools that discriminate against LGBTQ+ students and families?*

Yes

28. Do you support teaching comprehensive, LGBTQ-inclusive, age-appropriate sex education and HIV/STD prevention programs in our public schools?*

Yes

29. Would you support/co-sponsor legislation creating a non-binary gender marker option on state licenses? *

Yes

30. What kind of gun safety measures do you support that would reduce potential violence against the LGBTQ+ community and general gun violence? *

There is no question that we both have a hate and gun problem in Florida. Regarding violence against the LGBTQ+ community, I would advocate for any legislation that weakens or repeals Don't Say Gay, Stop Woke, Book Bans, and other such damaging legislation that in my view works to increase prejudices and hate. I would support any appropriate legislation that would strengthen anti discrimination and hate crime laws against the LGBTQ+ community.

Regarding our rampant gun problem, I am completely opposed to the recent removal of permitting requirements for concealed weapons and would support any effort to require permitting and training. I am staunchly opposed to any effort to adopt "open carry" in Florida. I would support any efforts to strengthen gun safety in the state; I address these in greater detail below in my response to #34.

31. What gun safety measures would you advocate for within the State Legislature?*

I would advocate for any and all gun safety measures, including requiring universal background checks, requiring waiting periods, the reimposition of permitting for concealed carry, the increase of training requirements for such permits, requiring liability or other insurance for gun ownership, banning silencers/large magazines/armor piercing ammunition/assault weapons and other such weapons of war, and would support safe-storage legislation of firearms.

32. Which steps would you take to ensure the safety of patients, doctors, and staff of reproductive healthcare facilities such as Planned Parenthood? *

In Florida's current legislative environment, this is a particularly difficult issue. Other states have passed legislation that shields doctors and staff of reproductive healthcare facilities from liability and specifically prohibit threats or intimidation against them. I would be incredibly supportive of these sorts of efforts; however, they are sadly unlikely to get much traction in our current legislature. To the extent any broader or ancillary bills that prohibit intimidation, threats, or violence against medical staff could get through the legislature which would have the effect of protecting these clinics and personnel, I would be supportive of them.

Outside of legislation, I would use my platform as an elected official to seek to preserve access to these clinics and to push for greater safety and security of these personnel. On a personal level, I have given contributions to private funds to keep these clinics open. I am very aware of the gravity of this issue; I have a close friend from college who is an OBGYN in Tampa who often discusses the serious security threats that these individuals face with me (she called me only a few weeks ago to tell me that she had a brick go through her clinic's window). At this stage, our best chance at preserving access to reproductive health such as abortion is to pursue the ballot measure that would seek to codify this

right in our state constitution. I am committed to assisting in this effort.

33. How would you respond to instances of hate crimes in Orange County (antisemitism, anti-LGBTQ+, anti-immigrant, etc.)?*

The proliferation of hate crimes and hate speech is one of the primary motivators behind my candidacy. As I have often told voters and fellow Democrats, I am a proud Sikh American; my community has been the target of numerous hate crimes since September 11, 2001. Perhaps most notoriously, my faith community was the target of a mass shooting in Oak Creek, Wisconsin after a white supremacist opened fire at Sikh Temple killing 7 congregants, an incident which galvanized my own advocacy on this issue. Sadly, my own community is not alone, and so many minority and historically underrepresented communities have been the targets of such hate. And here in Orange County, we have witnessed in just the last few years a dramatic uptick in hateful demonstrations, the display of hate symbols and language, and targeting of minority communities.

Our elected officials MUST speak out against these instances forcefully. And it must motivate and mobilize government action on numerous fronts. The criminal justice system must act to prosecute these individuals where a law has been broken, our law enforcement agencies must prioritize tracking these individuals and utilizing red flag laws and other mechanisms to hinder their access to weapons of war, we should encourage our schools and educational institutions to combat hate at its root and to and encourage inclusiveness. And elected officials must use their platform to call out those who refuse to call out hate.

An aside, the hate issue highlights exactly what is so wrong about bills such as Don't Say Gay, Stop Woke, and other such legislation. Our education system is our most important tool in preventing the spread of hate. Sadly, this sort of legislation has greatly hindered our ability to use this tool. Every Democrat must work tirelessly to ensure that this sort of legislation is weakened and repealed.

34. How would you work to decrease income inequality and promote affordable living in Florida? *

Addressing income inequality and promoting affordability is a multifaceted, complex issue. Although it would be difficult to address each issue affecting affordability here, there are several important elements to addressing these issues.

We must address housing, which has two separate crises at this moment; the property insurance crisis as well as the housing affordability crisis, both of which are interrelated.

On property insurance, while there are no quick fixes, any fix is going to require that the state provide additional funds to stabilize the market and ensure that the state has a more robust reinsurance system (reinsurance is, in essence, insurance for insurance companies). We should also be willing to not just help insurance companies, but homeowners directly - I would support temporary assistance to homeowners who are facing the potential of losing their home over their drastically increased insurance costs. And we must be willing to address long term issues that place upward pressure on insurance costs, such as our development patterns (I.e., continually developing in flood prone and low lying areas) that increase risk, especially considering the increasing effects of climate change.

On affordable housing, we must work to make sure that Sadowski housing trust money is fully funded every year by the legislature, and work to make sure that this money goes to rental assistance, multifamily, and other affordable housing rather than allocating this money towards single family homes and suburban sprawl. We should pursue the enactment of tenant protections at the state level, especially since local protections have been eliminated by the Live Local Act.

I have been an outspoken proponent of using TDT dollars to counter the impact of tourism on our economy, not just for tourism promotion. I would support legislative changes to allow for use on transportation and workforce housing.

I would support revisiting Florida's tax structure and tax incentives to ensure that our tax system is progressive and not regressive. I would support tax breaks on essential goods rather than simply sales tax holidays which have the effect of favoring wealthier consumers rather than those living paycheck to paycheck. I also support closing corporate tax loopholes by adopting measures such as the combined reporting system so that corporations in Florida pay their fair share of taxes.

I support efforts to increase pay amongst all members of our workforce. This is especially needed amongst our education system, where our teacher, staff, and support salaries are woefully low.

I also oppose efforts to create "sub minimum wages" and create exceptions to the gradual increase in minimum wages as required by Florida law.

There are, again, numerous avenues by which I believe we can increase affordability and income inequality in Florida, but the above will hopefully provide you with an example of the types of policies I would support.

35. Despite mental illness among adults and children being at an all-time high, Florida ranks next to last on per capita spending on mental health programs. What are your immediate and long-term plans for addressing this epidemic in Florida? *

It is essential that we increase spending on mental health programs. First and foremost, we must expand Medicaid, as this would greatly increase access to healthcare services for around a million Floridians, and would work to remove barriers to coverage for people requiring mental health services. Second, I would support any legislation or additional appropriations that would increase funding for mental health care, as well as the quality and availability of mental health care for Floridians. We must also be willing to consider low-cost improvements that can increase the delivery of existent care. For example, a 2022 ACHA report on Florida KidCare indicated that follow up care in a few key areas - specifically, as it relates to mental health and drug abuse - did not perform as per expectations. However, simple technology oriented improvements such as text message follow ups could increase compliance and outcomes. This demonstrates that even relatively inexpensive program improvements to existent services could be used to improve outcomes.

36. The Florida Republican Party is passing legislation that strips away LGBTQ+ rights, starting with our children. These shamelessly discriminatory bills force LGBTQ+ families to reconsider their future in Florida. What would you tell the parents of LGBTQ+ children in your District who feel they must leave Florida to protect their children? *

The parents of LGBTQ+ children must know that they have strong allies who are fighting for them. I would want these parents to know that our local laws and services are often more protective of LGBTQ+ rights than state laws, despite the constant threat they face through Republicans' efforts to preempt. I would also work with them to ensure they understood Federal protections they could avail themselves of. I would ensure that our office had easy access to and could provide private resources that are available to their children should they need them. And finally, I would encourage these parents to raise their voices to advocate for change; their voices could be perhaps the most powerful in effecting change and bringing attention to these matters.

37. The Trevor Project's 2022 National Survey on LGBTQ+ Youth Mental Health found that 45% of LGBTQ+ students seriously considered suicide, and 1-in-5 LGBTQ+ attempted it. How would you lead on this issue and work to decrease these statistics during your term in office?*

We must work to create an environment in schools that embraces and encourages diversity, open dialogue, and establishes school as a safe space for young people. Bills such as "Don't Say Gay" are incredibly destructive to that environment and must be repealed. We must fully fund schools and school professionals so that they can provide necessary social support and mental health services for all students. I strongly believe that a supportive, safe environment in schools can greatly assist LGBTQ+ and all other students and work towards lowering suicide rates amongst youth. I would be supportive of appropriations to and/or advocacy for organizations that work on this issue.

38. What are the top environmental concerns you feel should be addressed, and what solutions do you plan to bring forward if you were elected? *

District 35 contains some of the most important natural resources and landscapes in Central Florida, including Hal Scott Regional Preserve, Split Oak Forest, large parts of the Econlockhatchee River, and numerous natural lakes; it also is fast-growing with major developments through Southeastern Orange and Eastern Osceola counties. The single greatest environmental concern expressed by residents of our district, and by members of the Central Florida community generally in my experience, is the concern of overdevelopment. As I stated above, I support policies that prohibit development in environmentally sensitive areas and encourage redevelopment and urban infill rather than suburban sprawl, and I think such policies could work to address many of these concerns. We must also address the declining water quality in our state, mostly caused by runoff and poor infrastructure. And finally, and perhaps most fundamentally, we must acknowledge the danger of climate change and act accordingly. We should continue to incentive adoption of solar power, electric vehicles for our state fleet, and adopt policies that reduce emissions.

Additional Questions

39. Is there anything else you want us to know about why the Rainbow Democrats should support your candidacy?

Even though I am not a member of the LGBTQ+ community, I have always felt solidarity with the community in innumerable ways, including the desire to address the rise of hate and to foster inclusivity. Simply put, I want a state that is safe and welcoming, where a Floridian of any background, race, status, orientation, gender, identity, origin, or other characteristic can feel accepted and welcome without fear of hate or stigma. I often reference my own upbringing because my heritage is central to my identity; I am a Sikh American immigrant who came from a family of Indian immigrants. When I moved to the U.S. as a young student, I experienced bullying, physical violence, including being pushed and shoved in the bathroom, being force fed meat at lunchtime though I was a vegetarian, taunting, and isolation. I felt that I couldn't talk to my immigrant parents who were constantly working and did not understand the issues I was facing. While no comparison to the litany of issues faced by LGBTQ+ youth, my own experiences with bullying and "other"ism has always motivated my desire to advocate for those who are targeted for being perceived as "different". It is my earnest endeavor to always be an ally and advocate for the LGBTQ+ community and for equity and inclusion.

Thank you for your consideration!