

Circuit Judge Candidate Circuit 20/Group 19 Questions – 2026

Name: Judge James Stewart

Date: July 28, 2026

What do you believe distinguishes an exceptional judge, and how do your qualifications align with those standards?

An exceptional judge is one that has a proven track record of courtroom experience, a reputation for fairness and impartiality, and the respect of the legal community. In my career, I have tried or presided over more than 100 criminal and civil jury trials. This experience is critical to serving in a *trial court* position considering the legal issues unique to jury trials. Jury trials are fraught with appellate issues and it's imperative a trial court judge have meaningful jury trial experience prior to serving in this role. Before my appointment to the bench, I spent more than 17 years serving Southwest Florida as an Assistant State Attorney, prosecuting major felony cases. Throughout my career, I have earned a reputation for fairness, sound judgment, and professionalism. That reputation has resulted in support not only from our State Attorney, but also from our Public Defender, Regional Conflict Counsel, the Collier County Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers, and many other respected members of the defense bar. My colleagues have also entrusted me with leadership positions within the legal profession. As an attorney, I was elected twice by my peers to serve on the Board of Directors of the Collier County Bar Association. I also served as Vice Chair of statewide Florida Bar committees, including the Criminal Procedure Rules Committee and the Constitutional Judiciary Committee. In addition, the Florida Supreme Court appointed me to serve on the Committee on Standard Jury Instructions in Criminal Cases. Taken together, my jury trial experience, commitment to impartiality, and the confidence placed in me by prosecutors, defense attorneys, and my fellow members of the Bar have prepared me to continue serving the people of Southwest Florida with fairness, integrity, and fidelity to the rule of law.

How do you plan to ensure fairness and impartiality in your decisions while serving as a judge in Charlotte County?

I strongly believe in the independence of the judiciary and the importance of keeping politics out of the courtroom. A judge's responsibility is to decide every case fairly and impartially, based solely on the facts, the law, and Constitution. While it is easy to talk about those principles, a judge is ultimately measured by his or her record. Throughout my career, I have worked to earn a reputation for fairness, impartiality, and integrity. As an assistant state attorney, I viewed my role as that of a minister of justice. My responsibility was never to seek convictions for their own sake, but to pursue what was right and just in every case. That same philosophy applies to serving as a judge. It often requires making difficult decisions and remaining steadfast, even when those decisions may be unpopular or when public pressure suggests otherwise. I believe I have demonstrated these values over the years, and again I believe that is why my candidacy to continue serving on the circuit court bench is supported by our region's sheriffs, the State Attorney, Public Defender, as well as members of both the prosecution and defense bars.

What initiatives or reforms do you propose to enhance access to justice and improve the efficiency of the judicial process in our community?

Judges are not lawmakers, nor do we control local government budgets or determine how public funds are allocated. While I believe there are meaningful ways to enhance access to justice and improve the efficiency of our judicial system, many of those changes must come from those with the legal authority to enact them. Access to legal representation continues to be a problem for many in our community. Many litigants in our courts are indigent. Depending on the type of proceeding, some are entitled to court-appointed counsel, while others are not. For those who do not qualify, Southwest Florida is fortunate to have outstanding Legal Aid organizations that provide legal services to

individuals who otherwise could not afford representation. However, the need far exceeds the resources currently available. Expanding support for these organizations would enhance access to justice in our community. From an efficiency standpoint, I believe the recent amendments to Florida's Rules of Civil Procedure have already produced meaningful improvements. More active judicial case management and the implementation of firm case management deadlines have promoted a more timely resolution of civil cases, helping to alleviate the backlog that has developed on many dockets. Our Florida Supreme Court will hopefully consider making similar changes to case management rules in other divisions that would further improve the administration of justice in our court system.

Please answer each question in 300 words or less and email back to bwhite@charlottecountychamber.org on or before July 31, 2026.

