Transit Riders Union Questionnaire for 2019 King County Council Candidates

Candidate Name: Jeanne Kohl-Welles
County Council District: 4

1. What are the top one to three things you want to accomplish in the next four years? What policies or programs will you champion? What will happen with you on the King County Council that wouldn’t happen without you?

- I will continue to be a strong advocate for programs and services that reduce greenhouse gas emissions, other air pollution, and pollution in Puget Sound, such as pesticides, untreated storm water run off, wastewater and toxic chemicals.

- I will continue to champion more affordable housing, especially TOD, alleviating homelessness and increasing the availability of public transit, including increasing service hours and ensuring equitable fares.

- As Chair of the King County Board of Health (BOH) and Chair of the Council’s Health, Housing and Human Service Committee (HHHS), I will continue working to fund equitable access to programs and services to address our most significant public health challenges – lead in drinking water, gun violence, the opioid crisis, domestic and gender violence, pollution, and climate change.

Beyond having specific policy goals that I effectively champion on the Council, what sets me apart is my approach. I am committed to leading through listening and have spent my many years in public service building a reputation for integrity; if I say I’ll do it, I will. TRU would know this well, as we’ve worked together closely before. As an example, during my first term, we identified a number of issues with the service delivery of ACCESS vans, which serve some of our most vulnerable community members, including the elderly and individuals with disabilities. Through direct experience with the major challenges my wheelchair-bound mother experienced with ACCESS, e.g., very lengthy waits to be picked up to attend and return from medical appointments and not being able to use toilet facilities, I know how important it is that those services are delivered effectively and on time. With important input from TRU, we worked with Metro Transit to set up a new RFP process with a new set of evaluation criteria in order to field new contractors and make sure that problem and other problems would be resolved. In addition, I have sponsored and supported measures on major transit expansion, implementation of low/no-cost transit fare programs, and reforms to fare enforcement policies, to name a few.

If my years in public office have taught me anything, it’s that we are here to serve. I’ve always tried my utmost to be accessible, responsive, and effective which define and drive my work on the Council.

What would likely not happen if I were not re-elected would be the updating of the feasibility study of creating a Ballard (likely Shilshole)-Downtown passenger water taxi, completion of a pilot project addressing Shilshole Bay transit options, including a pilot project starting at the first of next year (on which I led in creating), continuing leading on Downtown Waterfront transit solutions and North Belltown transit options, and the close monitoring of a study on the impact of storm water effluent on our marine life, including Southern Resident Orcas and Chinook Salmon. I
have been the main driver of these projects, which is why I am not certain that anyone would pick them up if I were not to be re-elected.

2. Sales tax, which is regressive and volatile, constitutes approximately half of King County Metro’s total revenue. What will you do to achieve more robust, sustainable, and progressive funding for public transit?

I have been working with Council staff and King County Metro to identify funding sources for transit Countywide, and will continue to work with them to make sure that funding sources are equitable and sustainable. I would like to have the Council create – and I’m already working with Metro and some of my Council colleagues on this - a King County Transportation District in preparation for next year’s expiration of the City of Seattle’s Transportation District funding levy. Several options are being considered, one of which is a ballot measure in funding expanded transit access beginning in 2021 and in expanding Metro Connects to be more equitable, transparent, and sustainable. Funding sources could include an increase in sales tax, MVET, property tax, or a combination, or certainly some new source. But, for me, it is imperative that the funding source(s) be as progressive as possible.

I strongly believe we need to make our tax structure progressive at the State level as soon as possible. All counties in our state are struggling with budget problems, especially King County as a result of Tim Eyman’s I-747 which caps the growth limit for property taxes at 1% a year, regardless of inflation rates and population growth. We continue to lobby the Legislature to authorize our ability to include inflation and population growth as factors. I know the challenge well as I had sponsored legislation many times to reform our highly regressive tax structure that is known to be the most regressive in the entire country. We also need to eliminate the non-supplant restriction to allow special levies to fund existing services and programs and to adjust the qualifying income level on senior property tax exemption to a percentage of county median income and allow extension of the exemption to local levies.

3. With direction from the County Council, Metro recently began developing recommendations for an income-based fares program, guided by the principle that mobility is a human right and cost should not be a barrier to using public transit. It is possible that implementation of a truly comprehensive program would cause Metro’s farebox recovery rate to fall below the current 25% requirement. There are at least four strategies for fixing this problem. You may explain your answers and add other strategies you would consider, if you like.

- Raise fares for riders who can better afford to pay. _4
- Change county policy so that farebox recovery rates below 25% become acceptable. _4
- Scale down the income-based fares program so farebox recovery doesn’t fall below 25%. _3
- Find ways to increase employer participation in ORCA programs to increase fare revenue. _5
4. The Housing Development Consortium estimates that King County needs 54,000 more homes affordable to households with incomes less than 30% AMI to meet the demand. What will you do to close this affordable housing gap?

As a member of the Council’s Budget Leadership Team, I worked to add language to the 2019 – 2020 Biennial Budget that included funding to continue the Regional Affordable Housing Task Force (RAHTF), of which I have served as a member since its creation in June, 2017, as well as having been a sponsor of its enabling legislation. The budget also includes funding for several recommendations from the OneTable group, including a regional consolidation of homelessness services and increased behavioral health services. I am a member of that initiative.

I’ll continue to push for protections for renters, investing in affordable Transit-Oriented Developments (TODs), increasing funding for affordable housing developments for households earning less than 50% of the area median income, and combating the displacement of individuals and families, especially in low-income communities and communities of color.

I support (and voted for) the RAHTF’s Five-Year Action Plan submitted last December to eliminate the housing cost burden for households earning less than 80% of the median family income. We need to secure affordable housing for 44,000 units within the next five years, and 244,000 units by the year 2040. I have served as a member of RAHTF since its creation in June, 2017, and this past November the Council supported its continuation by adding three new FTE for its operation, and approving its becoming a committee of the King County Planning Council, of which I am also a member.

Building affordable housing close to transit hubs is crucial. To incentivize the creation of affordable housing and as a member of the four-person Budget Leadership Team, last fall I secured funding in the 2019-2020 Biennial Budget for several transit-oriented affordable housing developments, including for pre-design work for one at North Seattle College on which I worked with Speaker Frank Chopp and Enterprise Community Partners’ Home and Hope Initiative. This particular one had not been included in the Executive’s budget proposal, but I continued pushing for it as it will be so well-located and can be accessed across I-5 from the Northgate Transit Center via the Northgate Pedestrian and Bicycle Bridge to be constructed. I also pushed for increased funding for transit-oriented developments to be included in the Hotel/Motel tax allocations.

A good example of how the Council has been helping has been our partnership with the King County Housing Authority in providing rental housing and assistance through housing choice vouchers, subsidized housing, moderate-income housing, managing of federally-funded housing and importantly through its acquisition and revitalization of apartment buildings as well as building of new apartment buildings.

5. More than three years ago, in November 2015, King County and the City of Seattle declared a civil State of Emergency on homelessness. Since then, government action has fallen far short of an emergency response, and homeless counts and deaths have only risen. What will you do differently over the next four years?
We are far from our goal of making homelessness rare, brief and one-time, but we have made some important investments. In my first term, I worked successfully to get funding for modular housing, additional emergency as well as enhanced 24/7 shelter space, increased access to aid in finding housing and several affordable housing projects into our 2019-2020 Biennial budget.

As a member of the RAHTF and One Table, I know that an adequate supply of affordable housing is critical. I also know that solving homelessness requires a holistic approach. Income inequality, structural racism, displacement of existing affordable housing, an inadequate supply of affordable housing, reduced proportional federal funding, and substance use factor into homelessness. I will continue working for policies that prevent displacement of affordable housing and expand treatment services, including the expansion of mental health and behavioral health treatment for those in need. I represent the Council on the MIDD (Mental Illness and Drug Dependency) Advisory Committee.

In my second term, I’ll continue my focus on increasing both the supply of affordable housing and the number of 24/7 enhanced shelter beds with services provided to assist in exiting homelessness. I’ll use my leadership positions as Chair of the King County Board of Health and of the Council’s Health, Housing & Human Services Committee to push for increasing access to services for individuals and families experiencing homelessness and helping with the transition to permanent housing. In addition, I am convening this coming week a select committee with the purpose of guiding the review process and making recommendations to the HHHS Committee and to the entire Council on a major new homeless governance (HG) interlocal agreement (ILA) proposal to be transmitted by the Executive likely in August. This will be a major development in creating a new joint authority with the City of Seattle and potentially suburban cities. I can provide additional information if requested.

I will also continue to lead on the implementation plan of the voter-approved Veterans, Seniors, and Human Services Levy. The levy provides support to reduce homelessness and provide greater housing stability for veterans, seniors, and vulnerable communities throughout King County. In addition, I will continue leading on the oversight of the Best Starts for Kids Levy’s Youth and Family Homelessness Prevention initiative.

6. Do you support repurposing the youth jail and courthouse complex into something that meets basic human needs? (YES) Do you support divesting funds from the criminal legal system and investing in community based/driven solutions that enable safety, dignity and belonging? (YES) What is your plan for ending youth incarceration and surveillance in King County?

My answer to both questions is YES. At this point, the construction of the Child and Family Justice Center is almost complete. I was not on the Council when the ordinance was voted on to place it on the ballot, which the voters approved. I support the County Executive’s Zero Youth Detention initiative, which is currently under the jurisdiction of Public Health - Seattle & King County. We need to continue bringing down the number of youth detained along with providing increased diversion, treatment, restorative justice, and other community programs, and completely eliminate the detention of youth for status offenses. I was very pleased the Legislature passed the phasing out of the Becca Bill for status offenders that I vociferously and forcefully opposed and voted against in my first year in the Senate. Youth should not be detained for truancy and running
away (frequently from abusive homes), which I outlined in my letter to the editor that was printed in the Seattle Times on March 20th. In addition, I am 100% opposed to placing youth in solitary confinement and am committed to making sure that the legislation we passed (and I sponsored) prohibiting this will be enforced and implemented going forward. Equity in the justice system is also a high priority, which is why I serve on the LEAD (Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion) Policy Coordinating Group.

As part of the County Council, I am committed to supporting diversion and community-based programs, especially for youth. While we don’t have jurisdiction over the Seattle Public Schools, we do have a role in the juvenile justice system and supporting programs that keep young people out of detention, some of which are funded through Best Starts for Kids, approved by the voters in 2015. Two good examples of effective programs are the Choose 180 Program, which gives young people charged with low-level offenses an opportunity to avoid court proceedings by participating in a 1-day workshop, and restorative justice programs, such as peace circles that the juvenile division has begun using. I also support FIRS (Family Intervention Restorative Services) that intervenes in domestic violence situations, especially when the violence is coming from a youth, to help resolve some of the underlying problems rather than jailing the young person.

I am in favor of investing in community programs, with the acknowledgement that full and immediate divestment from the criminal legal system without adequate capacity in community programs would not constitute sustainable reform. I am committed to supporting the scaling up of existing community programs in order to meet that need, though.

7. King County is proposing to sell off surplus properties near the youth jail site to private developers, despite the fact that the County has established a priority that surplus lands be used for affordable housing. Will you push for all of these surplus lands near the jail to be used for anti-displacement & transformative justice projects rather than sold to private developers?

Yes, I will. I am dedicated to making sure that affordable housing is being created and supported in convenient locations near downtown. Given the real estate market and explosive growth in the region, the government should not be selling off any land to private developers.

8. The IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) has told us we need to reduce emissions by 45% within 12 years or doom hundreds of millions of people. Given that there’s so much inertia in our fossil-fueled system, what initiatives will you move forward at the County level to contribute to a response that is adequate to the crisis?

I agree the situation is dire and the IPCC report was quite clear. I have a unique opportunity, given my new position as Chair of the Board of Health (BOH), to raise awareness of the very serious public health hazards and inequitable impacts of pollution and climate change. I view pollution, climate change and inequality as major public health issues, perhaps the most challenging in our lifetimes. I have already included this escalating challenge in our adopted 2019 BOH Work Plan. My goal is to increase the County’s support and funding for programs, pilot projects and other immediate actions to reduce pollution, especially greenhouse gas emissions.

In my first year on the Council, I cosponsored a motion with Councilmember Rod Dembowski directing Metro Transit to study the feasibility of achieving a zero-emissions bus and van fleet. We
are monitoring the implementation of the report’s recommendation and working to expedite the timeline for bringing online the zero-emissions fleet. In February, I was very pleased to co-sponsor legislation imposing a six-month moratorium on construction of all fossil fuel infrastructure within the County and requesting the Executive to come back to the Council with options for converting to clean, green energy solutions. We are working now with the Executive on what to do in July when the moratorium expires.

King County has not yet acted on divesting from fossil fuels, unlike some other municipalities. I support divestment, as I believe economic pressure is extremely effective. I am exploring having the Council, as a first step, request a study from the office of Economic and Financial Analysis to determine how divestment would impact the County's finances, and how it would affect pensions, in particular.

The other primary means King County has to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in our region is by building more affordable TODs and increasing access to and frequency of public transit. I have focused on both these issues during my first term, and will continue to do so.

In my second term, I'll also continue to call attention to the severe public health threat and inequitable impacts of climate change and pollution. I'll push to increase funding for programs that reduce air and water pollution and greenhouse gas emissions.