Transit Riders Union Questionnaire for 2019 Seattle City Council Primary Candidates

Candidate Name: Heidi Wills
City Council District: 6

1. Many employers in the downtown and center city neighborhoods— including the City of Seattle— fully or partially cover the cost of ORCA transit passes for their employees. Incentivizing public transit and reducing drive-alone commuting is especially important during the next five years, with the “Seattle Squeeze” creating challenging traffic conditions. However, many employers don’t provide any transit pass subsidy. Anecdotally, higher-paid workers are more likely to receive employer-subsidized passes than lower-wage workers, who are disproportionately women and people of color. Many lower-wage workers earn too much to be eligible for the ORCA LIFT low-income reduced fare program, but not enough to afford housing in Seattle without being severely cost-burdened. For the following questions, please choose either Yes or No. You may explain your answers if you like.
   - Do you think employers of a certain size should subsidize employee transit passes? (Yes/No)
   - Would you support city council action to make this a requirement? (Yes/No)
   - Do you think the City should cover the costs of transit passes for employees of human service providers that are funded by city contracts? (Yes/No)

2. Report after report— notably the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report released in October 2018— tells us we need to cut carbon emissions dramatically NOW. What will you do to put Seattle on the path to decarbonization?

   We already have an electric utility at Seattle City Light that is carbon-neutral. I was in a pivotal position 20 years ago to lead those changes as a member of the City Council overseeing our public electric utility as Chair of the Energy Committee from 2000 – 2003. I led the charge in divesting from the Centralia Coal Plant and investing instead in wind power. In fact, we were one of the largest public electric utilities in the country at that time to make a commitment to wind power. I also started the Green Power Program where rate payers can voluntarily donate to new renewable projects on their utility bills. This program still exists and collects about $1M a year, and provides for solar projects investments on public buildings, including schools. I also led the efforts to update our commercial energy code to be one of the strongest in the country. That effort was contentious but I brought together diverse interests representing business, labor, the environment, and developers, and after two years, we got it done.

   Now there’s two important ways to further decarbonize our city: transportation and our built environment.

   We need to make the transition to truly being a multi-modal city. This means safe bicycle and pedestrian facilities and funding our Bicycle Master Plan. It means advocating for more frequency and availability of public transit and prioritizing buses with queue jumps and transit signal priority. It means providing options for the first mile/last mile to get to public transit. I favor electric scooters as a new carbon-free means of increasing mobility.
It means electrifying our city to encourage more electric vehicles and providing the infrastructure needed to fast charge these vehicles, especially for TNCs. There are over 32,000 TNC drivers in King County making over 1 million trips per month. These kinds of investments could make a big impact on our carbon footprint.

Metro made the commitment to convert their hybrid-diesel fleet to all electric-powered buses by 2034. We need leaders who will ensure that Sound Transit makes a similar commitment with its new investments in rapid bus service.

We need to integrate more housing into our city, and to do that, especially with districted elections, we need to involve the neighborhoods in those decisions. It sounds NIMBY to some urbanists and environmentalists, which are the interest groups that I identify with, to involve residents in these discussions. But when I was on the council, we had a robust neighborhood planning process led by Jim Diers in the Dept. of Neighborhoods. It was heralded as a model around the country. I think it’s time to engage neighborhoods again. There are valid concerns about displacement, concurrency and the need for adequate public transit to serve additional residents, loss of tree canopy, and other relevant issues that should be heard. We should set targets for each neighborhood and let each community decide where and how we will integrate more housing. Seattle’s future needs to include adding housing opportunities in our urban core, near our job centers and near our public transportation network. Personal transportation from distant, suburban communities adds to our carbon footprint and is expensive. The average cost of owning a vehicle is $10,000/year. We need leaders who will engage the community in how we integrate new housing opportunities into our neighborhoods and then implement those neighborhood plans.

ADUs should be an easy gain as a gentle way to increase affordable housing opportunities in our city, and yet they have been fraught with opposition, and still are. There are so many reasons to favor them. They’d allow aging homeowners the income stream of a rental on their property, or even renting out their home to a family while they move into an ADU on their own property. They’d allow adult children the ability to move back home after college and live autonomously. They’d allow people who work in our communities the ability to live close, from teachers who work at a nearby school to hair stylists and baristas who could walk to work at the neighborhood barber shop or coffee house. But going door-to-door in D6, I am finding considerable hostility to them based on what I think are dubious arguments.

Our building code could be changed to allow for cross-laminated timber, CLT, in high-rise affordable housing. Our current code limits buildings made of wood products to no more than 85 feet or 6 stories. Taller buildings have been made of CLT in other parts of the world, including Europe and Canada. It is less carbon-intensive than steel and concrete and CLT buildings are carbon-neutral. The carbon stored in the building helps offset greenhouse gases released in making and hauling the other building materials used in construction. It is estimated that a 6 – 10 story building made from CLT has the same emissions control as taking over 1,000 cars off the road for a year, and they are more energy efficient to heat and cool. It also gives a use for the pine forests in British Columbia that were killed by the pine beetle, currently posing a fire risk. The manufacturing of CLT locally would create more green jobs in the Pacific NW.
3. What is one community, specifically in your district, that you feel is being “left out” as our city grows and changes? What will you do to make sure their voices are heard?

I have been working with youth in South Seattle for over 13 years as the director of a non-profit and I now see our city through the lens of young people. Youth throughout our city, including in D6, need an advocate on the City Council. Young people need constructive activities after school.

One in four high schoolers do not graduate on time or at all. This increases their likelihood of finding themselves in the criminal justice system by 16%. For kids of color, it’s even more likely at 25%. Youth need mentors to stay in school.

And for those kids where college isn’t a good fit for them, (only 40% go on to post-secondary education) they sometimes think about going into the military. They don’t know about many jobs in the skilled trades and maritime industry right here in own community. We need to invest more in our apprenticeship programs and in connecting youth to them.

Seniors and youth need each other. How about more programs in our city’s senior centers and in our community centers to connect youth with seniors? Our city’s community centers are closed on Sundays. This is prime out-of-school time where they need constructive out-of-school experiences.

Their time outside of school plays a critical role in their long-term future. They need internships and learning opportunities to gain life skills, critical thinking skills, conflict resolution skills, a sense of personal responsibility, confidence in their own abilities, and a sense of connectedness and trust with others.

To be able to access opportunities throughout our city is another reason why an affordable and robust public transportation system is so important. Youth need an advocate on the City Council so their voices are heard and their needs are addressed. I will be an advocate for them.

4. What should the City’s role be in creating a healthy climate for business in Seattle?

I believe small, locally-owned businesses are essential to the vibrancy and health of our economy. As a small business owner, I think we should do more to support small businesses and address their needs. Business owners I’ve talked to would like the city to focus on basic services, from transportation improvements to providing more affordable housing for their employees to have housing options close to where they work. I believe that we should do more to encourage young people, people of color and women to take risks and create jobs as entrepreneurs in Seattle.

5. Seattle has the most regressive tax system of any city in Washington State, which has the most regressive tax system of any state in the US. Do you believe that the City has a responsibility to raise significant new revenue to address the challenges facing our communities? If so, what tax policies would you advocate for at the city level to generate new revenue?
I am open to congestion pricing done on a sliding scale so it’s not another regressive tax. I am open to adding a fee on to Lyft and Uber rides in and out of downtown and dedicating those funds to affordable housing. I am open to other ideas you may have.

6. Seattle is deeply divided on how to address the homelessness crisis. How would you characterize these divisions, and how would you address them?

I believe that regional partnerships are crucial because issues such as addressing the root cause of homelessness don’t stop at our city borders and the challenges are often inter-related (especially around housing affordability and transportation.) We need state and county partners to commit more funding to mental health, on-demand drug treatment programs, job training, financial management, diversion programs, and to addressing the complex issues around why people find themselves homeless. Having worked at the county for 6 years for Ron Sims and for Cynthia Sullivan on transportation, affordable housing, and growth management, I think regionally and holistically. That’s what is needed now. I have the background and skill set to be helpful in these efforts.

7. There is widespread agreement that all areas of response to the homelessness crisis need to be stepped up— but in practice, an elected official’s job is often to prioritize. How would you rank the following in terms of relative priority for increased funding and attention? (1=highest, 4=lowest)

You may explain your choice, but if you fail to rank the options, we will not consider your answer.

- Homelessness prevention (1, 2, 3, 4)
- Mental health and drug treatment services (1, 2, 3, 4)
- Low-income housing (1, 2, 3, 4)
- Emergency shelter (1, 2, 3, 4)

They are all important and I wish I could have given them all 1’s. I put housing first because one of the most important things we can do as a community is to ensure that everyone has safe and decent housing. I put homelessness prevention second because we know that it costs much less to keep someone housed and prevent homelessness than it does to help them get out of homelessness once they’ve been evicted (eviction on someone’s record also makes it harder to get another apartment.) The average amount someone owes before being evicted in King County is $1,200. We would do better to focus more of our efforts here, in keeping people housed. I put emergency shelter next, because sleeping outside can be dangerous and traumatic especially for women and children. For example, we only have 50 beds in King County for women fleeing domestic violence, and we know that’s not enough. And I put mental health and drug treatment next, even though it’s a top priority, because the other items are priorities too and this was just a difficult exercise, illustrating the importance of all of these issues.

8. What lessons do you think should be drawn from the experience of the “head tax” last year?

As you noted above, ours is one of the most regressive tax structures. Obviously, we need more affordable housing. But the head-tax revealed concerns from businesses with high headcounts and low margins like Uwajimaya, which would have been impacted but doesn’t contribute to our homeless crisis. A tax on gross revenue does not measure a company’s profitability and was a poor choice for a taxing mechanism. We’d do better to work more constructively with businesses to address our region’s challenges, especially on affordable
housing and homelessness. It’s not hard to repeal a controversial action by the council with the threshold for a referendum being signatures from merely 8% of the number of voters in the last mayoral election, which is under 18,000. Efforts like the recent announcement by Premera, Providence and Swedish to each donate $5M to Plymouth Housing for more permanent supportive housing is what we need more of. I’d like to be a part of engaging more businesses in making similar commitments.