Transit Riders Union Questionnaire for 2019 Seattle City Council Primary Candidates

Candidate Name: Heidi Stuber
City Council District: 4

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) Yes
- Would you support city council action to make this a requirement? (Yes/No) Yes, but it would be important to carefully consider the size of the business where this would be feasible to make sure we are not harming small businesses.
- 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) Maybe, I would need to know more about how often this comes up and depends on the size of the contract.

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?

As we grow as a city, we can’t continue to travel and live the way we always have. A big priority for me is seeing increased use of public transportation to combat climate change. District 4 is lucky to be home to 3 light rail stations by 2021 so we can be a big part of the solution for transportation. We need to expand local bus lines and service hours, particularly to include the first and last mile in connecting to light rail. In order to get more people utilizing mass transit, we need to increase the income limits for the ORCA LIFT pass. The city should transition all its vehicles to electric energy as soon as possible. I support incentives for small businesses and individuals to participate in vanpooling, ride shares, and work from home options in addition to mass transit in order to reduce congestion and cut carbon emissions. We also need to incentivize homeowners, businesses, and developers to make existing and new construction more energy efficient.

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?

In District 4, which is an older and richer district with a high percent of homeowners, I think the voices of the lower and middle class trying to find housing are not being heard. With a shortage of housing supply, families and individuals have a hard time securing safe, affordable housing whether they are looking to rent or buy a starter home. We know that our regressive taxation disproportionately affects lower income workers in our city and high property taxes hurt homeowners and renters alike. Even families making up to 75% of the area median income still
struggle with the high cost of living in Seattle. As a member of Seattle’s middle class, I would make sure the needs of this population are given equal weight with the vocal requests of higher-income homeowners in my district and support thoughtful density solutions to increase housing supply.

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

As an Executive for a local, small business, I know firsthand how it is becoming increasingly difficult for small businesses to thrive in Seattle. Between the high cost of rent, the struggle to pay employees what is a fair, living wage given Seattle’s cost of living, and employee turnover, businesses are being stretched thin. We need a City Council that is interested in hearing from and supporting the business community, not alienating them with policies that aren’t supported by the majority of Seattle. If we want the business community to be a part of infrastructure, transportation, or workforce solutions, we need to bring them into the conversation. I also think the city has a role in creating a vibrant city that is a great place to live and work by improving transportation infrastructure and supporting increases in housing supply so that it is easy and desirable to add jobs in the city and support our economic development.

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?

Washington state suffers from a regressive taxation system and I support changing the tax structure at the state level to implement a state income tax or a capital gains tax. I think while City Council can and should take a public position on tax fairness, they should look to state leaders to lead the charge on tax reform, as many local taxes, like the soda tax, only exacerbate regressive taxation. Locally, I think we can and should look at opportunities to maximize our current revenue and make sure taxpayer dollars are being used wisely. When working in business you learn that a robust budget takes into account both the opportunities for new and increased revenue streams and smart expense management, so any budgetary development would need to include an audit of current spending.

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

The division I hear about when talking to constituents boils down to both sides wanting to simplify an extremely complex problem. The root causes of homelessness, the different groups of homeless individuals, and the solutions that are needed are all nuanced and multi-pronged. It is human nature to want to simplify a problem so it is easier to understand whether that is taking one group of the homeless population and acting as if that is the entire group (like the Komo 4 piece) or talking about the lack of affordable housing, which is only one of the causes, and hinging all action on that one issue (like current council members).

I reject the idea that we have to choose between compassion and action. Seattle's homeless population deserves every opportunity to secure housing and access services. We need to take action quickly to get more people into supportive housing, because that is the most compassionate thing to do. We need to make sure we are properly budgeting for the different needs of the unhoused population which includes diversion and rapid rehousing, temporary and transitional
housing with wrap-around services, and low barrier permanent supportive housing. Once we can ensure that all those who want services can get services, we need to re-establish our expectations for clean and safe public spaces.

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) 3 – Let’s use diversion and rapid rehousing to keep people from falling into homelessness in the first place.
- Mental health and drug treatment services (1, 2, 3, 4) 2 – Housing first programs work because case workers regularly follow up with treatment options, so this needs to go hand-in-hand with housing.
- Low-income housing (1, 2, 3, 4) 1 - Housing first programs work, so this needs to be the top priority, particularly relatively low-cost temporary and transitional supportive housing, like tiny homes.
- Emergency shelter (1, 2, 3, 4) 4 – Emergency shelter is important, especially when it is very cold or hot, but given that shelter beds often sit empty, I would not make this a top priority, unless it was to invest funds to change to enhanced 24/7 shelter that allows pets, belongings, couples to stay together, etc. In that instance, I would rank it 2nd after low income housing.

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

The main lesson I would draw is that Seattle voters want leaders who will listen to the community and put forward thoughtful policy proposals, not political grandstanding. What many constituents have shared with me about the head tax is that they didn’t want City Council to create new revenue streams until there was more accountability for existing funding and a clear plan for how the money created by the head tax would be spend. They weren’t confident City Council had a plan developed for how the new revenue would be used to effectively combat the homeless problem. While we know we need a better solution for the homelessness crisis, our leaders need to look to existing funding structures first. We need to create an organized response to the crisis which prioritizes exits out of homelessness and holds service providers accountable to that goal. Once we have a coordinated (ideally regionally) approach, then we can evaluate the need for further revenue streams.