Candidate Name: Girmay Zahilay  
County Council District: District 2

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?

My top priorities are abolishing our system of youth incarceration in King County, making King County the regional leader in affordable housing and homelessness response, and providing better representation for marginalized communities like our unincorporated areas (e.g., Skyway). The policies I would champion are those focused on diversion tactics and rehabilitation for our youth, policies that would expedite King County Metro’s transition to an all electric fleet, and a plan to create a Central Authority at the county level which would allow the entire region to pool its resources and make focused, coordinated investments in affordable housing.

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 would like to propose a King County public investment vehicle. This investment vehicle would be used to invest a portion of public pension funds into local infrastructure projects. In other words, public employees currently have retirement funds that are invested in a portfolio of assets, and I believe a portion of those funds should be invested in local infrastructure like public transit. Other municipalities, like Dallas, New York, and Los Angeles, have had similar strategies for investing public pensions in local infrastructure and have gotten positive returns for their public employees. The benefits of this public investment vehicle are that we have a source of funding that does not come from additional regressive taxation, public employees get a good return on investment, and we all get to benefit from the economic multiplier effects of investing in the local economy.

I would also like to look towards establishing a County Bank (a public bank) that would allow us to keep our money instead of paying interest and fees to Wells Fargo. The additional revenue and bonding capacity would allow us to take on a whole host of progressive policies without relying on additional regressive taxes to pay for it.

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. Please rate each strategy from 0-5 according to how willing you are to pursue it (0=absolutely not willing, 5=extremely willing). 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. 5
- Scale down the income-based fares program so farebox recovery doesn’t fall below 25%. 0
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?

Better regional coordination is needed to produce Extremely Low-Income Housing (ELI) units for households with less than 30% AMI. Seattle has been the only municipality in the region really working these units and coordinated services, but they can’t do it alone. While I’m excited that King County is stepping up, other cities and counties need to commit more funding and make room for more shelters and ELI units in their communities too. A good place to start would be work toward fair share commitments for cities across the region targeted at ELI units and shelters. I’m optimistic about the passage of state legislation that allows public entities to consider discounting land for affordable housing; however, this is only the first step in producing affordable housing at scale on these properties.

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?

As the true regional governing body, the King County Council has a responsibility to step up to the challenge and lead on our region’s homeless crisis. My budget proposals would include additional funding for services related to homelessness in addition to investments in affordable housing. Affordable housing and displacement are extremely important to me. My mother continues to struggle to pay rent and stay in her home despite working double shifts at a nursing home for 20 years. The communities where I was raised in South Seattle have been fully gentrified. Funding and building affordable housing must be a top priority for the King County Council if we are to address our homelessness crisis. The Council must match the importance of this issue to its budgeting and spending priorities -- it cannot spend $130 million on financing stadiums while this issue exists. The Council should sell surplus land that it owns to purchasers who commit to building affordable housing. The Council should work with state and local governments to agree on focused, measurable goals for building affordable housing and create clear strategies for achieving those goals as a region. As a county councilmember, I would support having a Central Authority at the county level which would allow the entire region to pool its resources and make focused, coordinated investments in affordable housing. I would also like to see more investments being made in mental health and addiction services at the county level.

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

I have worked with hundreds of underserved youth throughout the country through the nonprofit I co-founded, Rising Leaders. One major system of oppression for youth is our criminal justice system and I support ending youth incarceration as we know it. The legislature recently passed SB 5290, a bill that stops courts from putting kids in jail for things like running away from home,
breaking curfew, and skipping school. Washington State is the #1 utilizer of detention for non-criminal violations like these, detaining more youth than any other state in the country. Let that sink in. Passing SB 5290 is a good start, but not enough. I am committed to working with legislators to take the long overdue step of ending our system of youth detention at the County. I support moving fully into the diversion programs and community based solutions that have been shown to be more effective and less damaging to our youth and our society as a whole. The time for incremental steps is over. We need bold action and I know the County and the State can work together to initiate a new era of justice in our region.

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?

This is unacceptable, I will absolutely 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.

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?

Growing up in neighborhoods like Rainier Vista and Holly Park, I saw the families I grew up around suffering from a plethora of illnesses like asthma and diabetes. Communities of color and low income communities are disproportionately impacted by the impacts of climate change, and are statistically more likely to have higher rates of health problems due to the effects of pollution. Environmental justice demands that the Council maintains clean and healthy living standards for our most marginalized communities. We must prioritize infrastructure upgrades and improvements in underserved parts of the county. We must continue to review health outcomes by zip code and see where sanitation and environmental upgrades can be made to promote health equity.

Additionally, I would like to see what our options are for expediting King County Metro’s transition to an all electric fleet. While King County is working towards an all electric metro fleet, we must plan to transition our transportation system to renewable energy sources well in advance of the 2045 goal to ensure that community impact is considered and access to transportation is not impacted. We need to create legislation that commits developers to reducing the environmental impacts of urban sprawl while ensuring that residents do not ultimately pay the price. We need to ensure that as electricity and heat are transitioned to renewable sources any increases in energy prices aren’t disproportionately shouldered by the poor by providing energy assistance to low-income households.