Transit Riders Union Questionnaire for 2019 Seattle City Council Primary Candidates

Candidate Name: Phil Tavel
City Council District: District 1

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) **NO** - Not in advance of exploring other incentives for employers of a certain size to further ensure employee access.
- 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) **NO** - This would also be a case where other incentives/methods should be explored.

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?

Emissions are on the rise: passenger vehicles up 1%, trucks 3%, jet exhaust up 22% in the last 2 years. We need bold leadership to explore and implement bold solutions. The State legislature needs to step up, but Seattle can’t wait for Olympia to lead. I’m all for reducing our carbon footprint and making Seattle a leader in green energy.

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? **This is another area where current city leadership just isn’t doing enough.** Equitable distribution of city services, including transit, has not come to the Arbor Heights, Highland Park, South Park and Genesee communities, which have not been prioritized. Pedestrian safety remains a key issue and some bus routes have been altered or cancelled. This is not OK. Seattle needs to be providing more, not fewer, transportation options. Highland Park and South Park need expanded coverage and more frequent service. The Council needs to listen to residents, hear their concerns, and address their transit and wide-ranging needs as the city continues to grow and change.

4. What should the City’s role be in creating a healthy climate for business in Seattle? Small business is the backbone of Seattle. The City must improve how it serves this stakeholder category. From small to large, we are hearing from owners who feel ignored --- their voices simply are not being heard. The City must work to streamline its business operations and refrain from over taxing, (Jobs Tax), as a key example.
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?

The City is obligated to identify methods to improve revenues. One key area of opportunity is addressing how the city spends those dollars. Many constituents have voiced feelings that while revenues have been increasing, spending has been much higher than it should be for the results we're seeing. I favor moving to a more progressive tax system combined with strong metrics and accounting to ensure every penny is spent as efficiently as possible.

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

It's easy to express concern and compassion towards those experiencing homelessness and express compassion. It's harder to effectively address the problem. I strongly feel the Council has not done enough, prioritizing new revenue streams or start-and-stop impulsive policies (e.g. jobs tax) to signal compassion rather than implement solutions. There's no single group to blame for homelessness and no magic solution to end it. That's the main division in my mind – those who want to meaningfully address the problem vs those who just want to demand the problem be fixed. Some want solutions while others want to place blame.

Addressing these issues will require outreach and aligning services. We must utilize law enforcement to help, not punish, those experiencing homelessness by providing an entryway to residential stability while simultaneously working on other issues. No one single element causes homelessness, and no one single approach will fix it. My approach will be to listen to community activists, neighborhood residents, local businesses, law enforcement, and – most importantly – those experiencing homelessness themselves in order to promote policies that allow for as much individuality as possible. It’s long past time to get started.

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

Explanation: The best way to reduce homelessness is to prevent it in the first place. When that fails, emergency shelters must be available to provide a transitional path to low-income housing. With the shelter need met, individuals are in a much better place to accept treatment and therapy. This order is the most logical approach.
8. What lessons do you think should be drawn from the experience of the “head tax” last year? **The biggest lesson:** Listen to everyone before pushing forward. Do the math. Talk to those impacted. Don’t get lost in rhetoric. Acknowledge potential drawbacks and don’t rush. Those seem like common sense things, yet all were missing on the head tax. Seattle can do better.