Transit Riders Union Questionnaire for 2019 Seattle City Council Primary Candidates

Candidate Name:  
City Council District:  

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, medium and large companies should subsidize transit passes for employees.

  It is the responsibility of every employer to look out for the well-being of their employees and take steps to improve mobility in the overall community. Transit pass subsidies can be a tool companies use to achieve those goals.

- Would you support city council action to make this a requirement? (Yes/No)
  
  Yes, as part of a program to reduce the amount of trips taken in private vehicles.

  The goal of any such policy should be to reduce the number of car trips taken in Seattle. If the city requires large companies to provide transit subsidies, that may be the only strategy they use. We should allow employers the creativity to try other solutions as well. Other solutions may include liberal work-from-home policies, walking and biking incentives, and bike/scooter share programs. My end goal is fewer car trips, however accomplished.

- 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)
  
  Yes and/or require providers offer passes.
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?

Seattle’s largest source of carbon pollution is transportation, and passenger cars in particular. We need to get people out of their cars, now. The best way to lower automobile emissions is through housing policy. By creating housing density and walkable neighborhoods, we can empower Seattle residents to leave their cars at home—or give up their cars entirely. The lowest polluting trip is the one not taken.

One of my top priorities is to legalize a 100% walkable Seattle. Every resident should have at least groceries, childcare or a school, and a cafe or restaurant within walking distance of their home. For thousands of our neighbors, the land use code completely outlaws these uses near their homes. People will always use their vehicles if we make convenient alternatives illegal, so I will work to legalize basic amenities within walking distance of every home.

When housing scarcity and high prices squeeze folks into the suburbs, their carbon footprints double due to the more carbon intensive lifestyle of suburban living. I will fight to re-legalize duplexes, triplexes, and quadplexes throughout Seattle to create denser neighborhoods, a more equitable distribution of housing, and support more growth in our low carbon city.

I will also fight for streets that are safe for all users. Seattle must build a safe and connected bike network for all users of all abilities. This includes cycle tracks, protected intersections, and prohibiting right-on-red turns. My goal is that a bike network should be sufficiently safe to allow a parent to want to bike with a child from home, to school, to work, and back. If our streets are safe, and our bike routes interconnected, then people in Seattle will choose to bike instead of drive.

I want to empower people who cannot, or prefer not to, use human-powered transportation to use transit to move around our city. I will lead the Council to direct SDOT to create bus-priority lanes, grade-separation, or car-exclusion areas to move more people faster. I want to complete the City Center Connector and I want to extend the streetcar north on Broadway.

Specific to District 3, I will encourage SDOT to prioritize the construction of the Madison BRT route. Also, while King County Metro is not within the control of the City Council, I would ask that agency to reinstitute the all-day Route 43 to better serve our district. Also, I am delighted that District 3 is getting a light rail station at Judkins Park in 2023, and I look forward to working with SDOT, King County Metro, and Sound Transit to make sure that the station is well connected to the rest of our pedestrian, bike, and transit infrastructure. If we design our city to allow fast and reliable transit, we allow more people to choose not to drive.

Finally, I want to bring our city beyond carbon neutral and become carbon negative. Seattle owns our own utility (Seattle City Light), which gets its power from low-carbon hydropower.
Because hydropower can produce electricity 24 hours a day, we can sell low-carbon electricity at premium prices on the grid to California at night, and during the daytime we can purchase California’s surplus solar power at a discount. Seattle already does this to some extent, but there is room for us to leverage our hydropower further to replace even more fossil fuel sources and ultimately decarbonize our city.

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?

The median income in Seattle is now over $100,000/year. The service staff who operate our retail businesses, the workers who build our city, and anyone else making less than six figures is getting squeezed out entirely and their voices are no longer heard at city hall or at the ballot box. These economic effects disproportionately harm people of color, and the LGBTQ community, turning economic displacement into racial and identity displacement as well.

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

Businesses need well-paid customers, and they need skilled employees. They will go wherever they need to for these things. Seattle creates a healthy business environment by investing in its people, in education, and in infrastructure. It helps (retail) businesses get customers by building a well-functioning transportation system.

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 tax system in Seattle is unfair, unjust, and inequitable. Unfortunately, we are stuck with this system for now. Because any significant new revenue would likely come from regressive tax sources, the City first has the responsibility to spend its money effectively. I am reluctant to raise taxes because the people who a tax would hurt the most are already hurting too much.

I support an income tax as the most equitable method to raise City revenue. However, this is a long-term battle – one that I am eager to take to Olympia, but not one that can be implemented quickly. Alternatively, a tax on capital gains would be preferable to our current tax scheme, but faces the same problem that Seattle lacks authorization from the state to levy such a tax.

In addition, I am willing to propose and support new taxes on large businesses who benefit from Seattle’s prosperity, but I want clear goals for how that money would be used, and an accountable plan for spending it. One use for such revenue would be to address homelessness in Seattle, we need to develop an integrated solution with our partners in King County,
determine the ongoing cost, and then present the public with a reasonable plan with clear goals and performance measures.

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

Broadly, people’s response to the homelessness crisis depends on their opinion of whether people who are homeless choose to be so. On one end, some voters believe it’s a personal choice and therefore purely enforcement should be used to keep homeless people from “getting away with breaking the law.” At the other end of the spectrum, voters believe homelessness is overwhelmingly a mental health issue, addiction disorder, or other uncontrollable consequence and homeless individuals need treatment.

I think that regardless of rationale, Seattlites want people to no longer be living in unsanitary tents on the streets (be it for humanitarian or selfish reasons), and I will be doing everything in my power as a councilmember to get everyone who is homeless in Seattle and King County sheltered. We have 11,200 homeless neighbors in King County and we only have service capacity for 6,000. We must close this shelter gap by provisioning useful services and meet the needs of unhoused individuals, whatever their circumstance.

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)

1) Prevention & Low Barrier Shelter
2) Low income housing
3) Mental Health & Treatment
4) Emergency Shelter

My top priority is getting everyone sheltered first and foremost before working on other, more challenging issues such as mental health and substance use disorder issues. It is nearly impossible to make progress on other aspects of one’s life if they’re not sheltered and fed.

8. What lessons do you think should be drawn from the experience of the “head tax” last year?
The head tax situation demonstrated that taxes should be productive, not punitive. By characterizing the tax as a punishment for businesses, and for Amazon in particular, the Council lost the support of the Seattle public who support or work for those businesses – as well as the support of people who want their government to coherently present well-reasoned policies instead of appealing to negative feelings towards some of the city’s industries.

In addition, the head tax did not meaningfully address the problem it purported to solve. 75% of the funds raised would have built a few hundred housing units annually, while Seattle has a shortage of 30,000 housing units. If the head tax had a clear plan to effectively address the homelessness issue, then I think it would have received more support. It would received mine.