Transit Riders Union Questionnaire for 2019 King County Council Candidates

Candidate Name: Abigail Doerr
County Council District: King County Council, District 4

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?

I have spent my career bringing together coalitions of labor, communities of color, environmentalists, business and more to tackle some of our regions biggest challenges. I led campaigns to pass Sound Transit 3 and to bring more Metro Bus service to Seattle neighborhoods. Most recently, I led the statewide Initiative 1631 campaign, a first in the national effort to hold corporate polluters accountable and invest in communities hardest hit by pollution. I have committed myself to building healthy, thriving, and equitable communities and will fight to ensure King County is moving forward on housing and homelessness, public transportation, and our environment. We need fresh energy, new ideas, and bold leadership on the County Council to tackle these challenges.

My top three priorities are:

- Creating, funding, and enacting a 20 year plan to build the 244,000 new units of lower income affordable housing King County will need in order to meet the demands of a growing population.
- Creating stable and regional funding for King County Metro Buses and ensuring our transit system is safe, affordable, and frequent.
- Address climate change and getting King County to zero emissions.

As of now, bold policy ideas do not come from the County Council. No one is using their seat to move forward meaningful progressive policies that adequately address the scope of the challenges and opportunities the county faces. I will change that. I have been proud to work in coalition with TRU to bring diverse coalitions together to address our most urgent needs. We have 12 years to address climate change, King County has too many people who need to be housed, and we’re watching the cost of living skyrocket. This region is becoming a place where working people cannot afford to live and the County Council needs bold new leadership. I am running to bring that energy to the council.

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?

Seattle Transportation Benefit District Prop 1 is funded by a $60 vehicle licensing fee and a .01% sales tax. I am strongly supportive and will fight for a regional replacement to STBD prop 1 but believe the County must fight hard for more progressive funding options for the replacement.

The options the legislature currently offers to local jurisdictions especially here in King County are not adequate to develop progressive funding solutions and I would work with my colleagues on the Council and coalitions of business, labor, communities of color, and more to develop our ask of
the legislature and to the voters. The window to go to the ballot in 2020 is narrow and it is disappointing that the Council has not made this issue a priority enough to lobby the legislature for additional and more progressive funding options.

I was told by my opponent and heard her say at forums that we are just too restrained to progressively fund our region, including transit. I reject that premise and won’t stop fighting for progressive funding solutions. Some options could include: business and occupation tax for transit (potentially in exchange for free transit passes for our workers), allowing local jurisdictions to access the MVET, property tax, real estate excise tax, developer impact fees are just a few. Farebox recovery is not a tool that is helping Metro think creatively about how we are funding transit nor is it helping us develop our full system needs -- which should also require employers with over 100 employees to fully subsidize transit benefits.

Having watched elected leaders and community groups advocate for progressive taxation over the years, it’s clear to me that it is necessary to reframe the conversation and ensure we are developing an intentional message that shares the opportunities we could achieve by eliminating this broken tool. Key partnerships with advocacy organizations is also necessary for the issue to be resolved. Budgets are not sexy nor is wonky revenue policy and as a result the urgency from the legislature to address this has not been realized. I’ve watched the legislature in the last two cycles take on some of our biggest structural issues. However, progressive funding has been the lowest of priorities and the hardest to develop a majority.

I have spent my career working to build public support for increased revenue -- and in all of these efforts we’ve needed to clearly layout the benefits and what you get when you vote to increase your taxes. King County leaders must both lead the charge for reforming our broken tax system but also ensure we are demonstrating the incredible value of investing in our government programs and helping frame the message about the many ways we’ll see the benefits of changing our regressive system.

For Metro’s funding, I’m not beholden to one solution but we need leadership on the King County Council who is pushing Metro to develop a clear plan on what our funding needs look like - what voters and the public would get if there is additional investment AND pushing a community conversation about how to fund it equitably and progressively.

At the end of the day, I would support increasing the sales tax to fund transit regionally because it is more harmful to our communities to not provide reliable options for people to get around. I am committed to ensuring we are taking advantage of this opportunity to work with the City of Seattle, the Legislature, and King County to find new funding tools.

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 the 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.
The King County Council’s prioritization of Metro’s high farebox recovery is regressive and an unhelpful financial performance metric. It harms low income communities who end up paying for transit twice through our regressive sales taxes and to ride transit. It also increases Metro’s need to rely on Fare Enforcement which disproportionately harms the most vulnerable users. I am pleased Metro has worked to update it’s fare enforcement policies but I don’t think they went far enough to ensure transit is safe and welcoming for everyone.

I was recently on the D and fare enforcement got on. Before fare enforcement even asked a man sitting behind me for his transit pass, the man emphatically repeated that he could not pay and he didn’t get paid for a few days. The fare enforcement officers were kind and trying to explain to him the penalties (which were the improved less harsh penalties) but it was a humiliating and unnecessary exercise. Regardless of how flexible the improved penalties are, the presence of a fare enforcement officer is intimidating and unwelcoming. I believe King County and Sound Transit should adapt their fare enforcement program to “Transit Ambassadors” and train these workers to be shepherds of transit, of King County, and help connect people with the many services our region provides to the most vulnerable in our community.

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?

I feel strongly that we need to approach affordable housing development in the same way we’ve approached building out our mass transit system. We need a regional housing investments to build not just the 0-80% ami affordable housing but also middle income affordable housing and tools to create missing middle housing.

Land use and additional zoning tools are necessary (especially for middle income housing) but we need to put a price on what it is going to cost to build out the 244,000 units of housing and similar to the approach on ST3 we need a funding plan to pay for it. I haven’t seen leadership on how we are going to plan and fund.

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?

I was at the event in 2015 where the then Mayor and County Executive declared a state of emergency on homelessness and I have not seen the urgency required to truly address this crisis. I’ve seen our advocates play tug-a-war on a limited bucket of funding. It is always that our direct intervention programs are competing for funds for upstream solutions from preventing homelessness from happening such as building actual affordable housing. While we know that
First models are the most effective tools to address homelessness - you must have housing to do it.

First, we need to identify the actual cost of building the housing we need and we need to demonstrate the political will to fund it. We need stable, dedicated, adequate, and long term funding to build the 244,000 units of housing we need in the next 20 years. We were successful at finding the appropriate resources for Sound Transit 3 which generates about $1 billion annually. The only thing holding us back from doing the same for affordable housing is the political will.

Second, we need to be adequately funding our intervention programs and ensure those funds are not competing with the longer term affordable housing resources we also desperately need.

Homelessness is the first thing on people’s minds at the door and it is clear that people have little confidence in our current leadership’s ability to address this crisis. I believe the head tax whiplash was very damaging to our public’s faith in leadership to tackle this issue - not necessarily because people are opposed to the head tax. I feel strongly that voters believe that we all need to pay our fair share including the companies that have exasperated affordability in this region. I believe the only way we are going to truly end homelessness in King County is by a) adequately funding the housing, prevention, and intervention programs and b) coordinating our government response well and c) coming together as a community to agree on a reasonable path forward to provide adequate and equitable funding for these programs.

Our community is very divided and there is a leadership gap on bringing people together to agree on a plan. I have worked closely with the business community on Sound Transit projects and without their support we would not have been able to expand Sound Transit. I’m not naive to think the business community will support the progressive funding, but I’m concerned how deeply divided the business community is from the progressive community and watching the two sides retreat and continue to lob bombs at one another is not going to help us address these issues. I do think that there could be a lot more progress achieved coming together to map out how we address these issues together. As a City we were able to get it done on minimum wage and on HALA. It’s been disappointing to watch our current County Council fail to demonstrate the same political courage on an issue where we all have so much on the line. We must do better by our neighbors who are experiencing homelessness.

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 believe the County was wrong to move forward on construction of the youth jail without listening to and recalibrating their plans in partnership with the community. I believe the facility is too large and the County did not listen to the community. Unfortunately, the project will be mostly finished before November’s elections. I do support transitioning the complex.

I support divesting funds from our criminal justice system to invest in community based and community driven solutions. I am a strong supporter of diversion programs and restorative justice work and have participated in the programming the County currently runs and recognize the
important work that needs to be done to expand these programs. We need to significantly increase our investments in these programs along with upstreaming the investments.

I believe we can get to zero youth detention in King County and am ready to roll up my sleeves to work with our Executive, Superior Courts, School Districts, and Prosecutors to ensure we are reaching these goals. We’ve seen the King County Council set ambitious goals to get to zero youth detention and then seen them do very little work to get there. Reforming a broken system takes a significant level of engagement, support, and leadership. For the Council to set ambitious goals and not do the hard work to follow through is emblematic of what this Council has become and I will interrupt it.

While much attention has rightly been focused on our youth detention facilities, there is also so much work that needs to be done to shine a light on, transform, and address in equities in the adult jail and I am prepared to be deeply invested and engaged in this community. One important first step I support is working with King County Elections to expand voting rights for people who are in our detention facilities.

I also strongly oppose King County using any form of facial recognition surveillance by our law enforcement officers and would immediately move forward legislation similar to San Francisco’s legislation to prevent the use of facial recognition by our King County Sheriff’s.

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?

Yes, I will. I have worked diligently in the past to ensure that surplus property owned by the public be used for affordable housing development and believe surplus land near the jail should be used for anti-displacement and transformative justice projects.

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?

The threat of climate change and its impacts on our communities is imminent. I am running for King County Council because we need leaders who are moving forward solutions that reflect the magnitude of the problem. King County is well positioned to address climate change but it is not on target to reach the goals in the County’s Climate Action Plan. The King County Council must move urgently and decisively to play a leading role in addressing Climate Change.

The King County Council recently passed a moratorium on new fossil fuel infrastructure that applies to unincorporated King County. Had I been on the council, I would have voted for this effort and would enthusiastically lead similar efforts. However, I am concerned that the current council is more interested in bringing forward ideas that sound good on the surface and then upon closer look it’s clear that the action was much weaker than it should have been. I was disappointed that the language in the ordinance did not specifically discuss race or equity nor did it lay out any
tools to ensure that we are supporting workers who are employed in the fossil fuel industry transition to clean energy jobs. Additionally, the moratorium is a good step but its impact is minimal. The effort seemed like an opportunity to publicly take on oil companies but the council has failed to advance additional bold policies that would actually help the County reach its goals in the climate action plan - such as developing solutions to how we are going to expand our transit system.

We must implement tangible strategies to transition our region off fossil fuels and towards clean energy that have labor and communities of color at the table. It is not enough to block future fossil fuel infrastructure - we must develop long term and intentional strategies to invest in alternative energy programs. The task in front of us is monumental but achievable. We can drive King County to 100% renewable energy, but not if the policies we pass have nothing under the hood.

I will partner to develop real solutions to:

- **Expand our transit system**: The number one contributor to climate change in King County is carbon emissions from transportation fuels. King County Metro is not on target to reach our transit goals in the climate action plan. We must expand transit regionwide through an STB and ensure we are developing additional tools to increase transit trips all across our county.
- **Electrify our transit fleet**: Metro is on track to transition the diesel bus fleet to electric battery by 2040 - we must work more urgently to get the fleet transitioned to electric in under 10 years.
- **Get a Subsidized Transit Pass into the hands of every person in King County**: Many of our major employers do not provide fully subsidized transit passes to their workers, including the University of Washington. That is unacceptable. I will partner with the City of Seattle and our businesses and advocates to develop strong policies to get free and affordable passes into the hands of everyone in this city.
- **Improve first and last mile connections to transit**: King County must be working with local jurisdictions to ensure that our transit infrastructure has safe and reliable connections to get people to and from transit.
- **Ensure King County Flood Control District funds are combating climate change**: The King County Council must lead on stormwater clean up through the King County Flood Control District, whose board is the King County Council. Seattle residents contribute 40% of the revenue in the Flood Control District and only 10% of those funds are invested in Seattle. Resources that are currently spent on cement levy structures rather than critical habitat restoration and stormwater projects that can better prepare us for floods, prevent landslides, and ensure that stormwater is not entering our water systems.
- **Build Dense Housing**: Ensuring people are housed and housed densely is one of the important intersections of climate, land use, and transit. King County must be leading the charge to ensure we have the infrastructure funding (and green jobs) for much needed housing from zero to middle income levels. Utilizing the Growth Management Act as a tool to incentivize and ensure local jurisdictions are zoning appropriately to densely prepare for growth and prevent sprawl that harms our environment.

I am running because I want to ensure that King County is safe and healthy for everyone. King County needs a champion on the Council who prioritizes our environment. We can have a major
impact on the future of our environment if we move more people out of cars and into walkable, bikeable, and thriving communities.