Transit Riders Union Questionnaire for 2019 Seattle City Council Primary Candidates

Candidate Name: Jay Fathi, M.D.
City Council District: 6

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)
   - Would you support city council action to make this a requirement? (Yes/No)
   - 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) This should be explored for certain.

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?

I know firsthand from treating children and adults who have suffered as a result of pollution in our communities that climate change is an existential, real, and advancing threat to our planet and its inhabitants. And, it is well-known that the effects of climate change disproportionately affect communities of color and the underserved.

I will work regionally, with cities and counties around the Puget Sound and across the state, to set bold climate objectives that we can meet and exceed by working together. For example, Seattle City Light uses 100% carbon neutral energy, but we must move to get our entire city, region, and state onto a completely renewable energy grid. We need to up production from renewable energy resources, expand consumer access to it, and invest in new clean energy technologies. These big transitions will come at the cost of some jobs, so it is necessary that we invest in retraining programs so people working in industries impacted can transition to new clean energy jobs locally. Ideally, the move to clean energy will create a net increase in jobs.

I will work to expedite the Ballard Light Rail extension, and continue to advocate for further investments in public transit, as we must aggressively push our efforts to get people out of their cars, which make up more than 40% of the state’s harmful carbon emissions.

We need to explore congestion tolling downtown, which could significantly cut greenhouse gas emissions in 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?

There are young adults, who have recently graduated high school and college, or are early in their careers and living alone or just starting their families, who are being forced out of Seattle—both those who have moved here for our abundant opportunities here, and those who grew up in here. I’ve talked to many parents in the district who know that there is no way their children can buy a home in Seattle, and not infrequently, these same parents are helping subsidize the rent payments of their working adult children. And of course I’ve talked to many young adults who can’t afford the luxury apartments being built locally, and can barely afford the multiple new microstudios in Fremont either. Many of our young adults are filling roles that we desperately need, including in the service sector and social services and nonprofits, but they’re being forced to move further away from the City and communities they grew up in and still work in. This is unhealthy for our community and must change. I’d like to have a town hall specifically for young renters, and work closely with the Seattle Renter’s Commission (which currently has three vacancies that I’d like to see us fill quickly). We need to further explore rent subsidies. We can find better solutions for these problems.

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

Our small businesses are getting hit hard by the rising costs of rent and property, impacting their bottom line and ability to keep up with the labor standards and minimum wages Seattle workers deserve and need. I’d like to support small and micro businesses through expansion of the Office of Economic Development and create unique and innovative spaces for business development, business incubations, and access to markets and economic resources. I’d also like to advocate for the state Legislature to reform our B&O tax to focus on profits over gross receipts so we are taxing wealth instead of low-profit margin businesses and local stores.

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?

Our current tax system is completely counter to our values of equity, innovation, and leadership in our state, particularly in Seattle. Those that have more should give more—whether it is individuals, or businesses. Washington State needs to adopt an income tax, and explore potentially lowering or eliminating other taxes that unduly burden the low income. I envision a state where no one is too poor to live, no one has to sleep outside, where local businesses can thrive and flourish in their communities, and where large employers hire local workers and invest back in our state by paying a fair share in taxes. I envision a City where young adults who grew up here aren’t priced out because of a lack of affordable housing, and retirees aren’t priced out because of property taxes.

To achieve this vision I would ask the State Legislature to transition to a new tax structure by a) instituting a progressively leveled income tax, b) lowering property taxes for low and fixed-income residents, c) evaluating and adjusting impact fees as needed so housing that is
developed for well-off residents is balanced with housing for low-income residents so they can live in their desired communities, and d) closing corporate loopholes and reforming our B&O tax to focus on profits over gross receipts so we are taxing wealth instead of low-profit margin businesses and local stores.

Unfortunately, in the meantime, the State has the City’s hands tied on most progressive ways to raise revenue. To protect and expand funding for public services, we need to consider our options for taxing large corporate profits and capital gains, and refining local impact fees for developers. Our current model of repeatedly asking the taxpayers to raise their property taxes every year is one of the driving forces of displacement, and we are fortunate that residents understand the need for public dollars for social services and education and continue to approve these levies. But this is not a permanent solution, and we need to immediately work on different ways to raise revenue and also regain the trust of the taxpayers by working with the City Auditor to address the identified gaps where we are spending public dollars either ineffectively or without data to show our investments are working.

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

I believe there is more consensus than some think regarding how to best address this crisis. I have knocked nearly 1,000 doors personally and met with hundreds of folks in the community and at forums—the vast majority of people relay the same themes: They state they are progressive and compassionate, but feel that the current approach is allowing too many unsheltered individuals to suffer, and that they feel that the immense growth of the homeless crisis has resulted in unsafe conditions at times both from a public health, and public safety standpoint, both for those sheltered, and the unsheltered. Most understand that the path to homelessness is individualized, complex, and often is associated with poverty, childhood trauma, job loss, and unaffordable housing, among other factors. A recent survey showed that 80% of Seattle/King County respondents felt it was ‘our moral obligation to help people who are homeless.’ However, there are some who believe we do not need additional funding on the issue, and they desire better accountability and coordination between entities and jurisdictions. Others feel there needs to be increased funding. All seem to agree there is a lack of leadership from City Hall on the issue, and a lack of direction, data, and clear plans with goals from our leaders. It’s human nature to have these conversations from a qualitative view, from our personal experiences and observations, but it also brings with it biases, especially as we see stories in the media equating homelessness with crime. I’d like to focus our conversations on hard data so that everyone can approach the conversation from the same set of facts. I also believe that we can start these conversations from places of commonality: we all want an end to the homelessness crisis, we all have compassion for folks experiencing homelessness, and we want public dollars and resources to be spent effectively. This will require a community wide approach.

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)

I believe these all deserve intense attention, but am ranking them based on which ones need more funding from the City immediately, and of course, in reality these issues must be addressed simultaneously. I think first and foremost we need to get people into safer areas indoors. Next, low-income housing is incredibly expensive so it deserves a lot more funding and attention; the housing first model is successful. Third is mental health and drug treatment services, for which I’d like to work with local providers to open more facilities, and help by exploring waiving some permitting and other fees to get behavioral health centers opened so we don’t have to turn anyone away. Finally is homelessness prevention, which ‘acutely’ includes particularly for emergency funding assistance for renters, but mostly through legislating MHA, impact fees, and MFTE changes so the market will provide more housing for folks at all socioeconomic levels. And of course, we must move even further upstream in preventing homelessness, to address poverty and income inequality, institutional racism, adverse childhood experiences, childhood and adult trauma, including domestic violence, an inadequate health insurance system, inadequate behavioral health evaluation and treatment modalities, and addiction (the latter are related to priority #3).

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

It is clear Seattleites are progressive and compassionate and want to truly address our homelessness crisis for neighbors living unsheltered, and for the health of our communities. The entire ‘head tax’ endeavor was handled poorly. We need to coordinate our efforts, clearly communicate the challenges we are facing with data, agree on the problems we want to solve, meet early on with all stakeholders in a transparent fashion, and address funding.

We will very likely need additional investments to increase access to immediate shelter and stable, affordable longer-term housing, as well as to increase access to mental health and substance use disorder treatment facilities. We will need to collaborate with all stakeholders, including those who may be taxed, and also communicate clearly and transparently with voters, and deliver results.