Transit Riders Union Questionnaire for 2019
Seattle City Council Primary Candidates

Candidate Name: Ed Pottharst
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)

Since 2009, San Francisco has required employers with 20 or more employees to provide employee transportation benefits, including a transit pass, reimbursement for vanpool charges, or employer-provided transit. The goal of the program is to foster public transportation and fight climate change.

Several large Seattle employers provide fully subsidized transit passes to employees as a way to decrease congestion and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Seattle Transit Riders Union, 350 Seattle, SEIU Local 925 and others have recently urged the University of Washington to fully cover the cost of employee transit passes. They make the case that it is cheaper in the long run for the university to make transit free for employees than to build more parking.

Covering the costs of transit passes for employees of human service provider that are funded by City contracts would be a clear statement by the City that it wants to encourage use of public transportation, reduce congestion and vehicle emissions, and lessen the burden of transportation costs on workers and their families.

Recently, several cities have experimented with temporarily free transit to help address air pollution including Salt Lake City. Some cities around the world have fully implemented fare-free transit. In Seattle, we should investigate the benefits and downsides of fare-free transit. It could
help incentivize single occupancy vehicle drivers to shift to more environmentally-friendly transit, carpool and vanpools, and bicycling and help ease financial strain for low-income households.

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?
- Require employers of a certain size to subsidize employee transit passes (see #1 above)
- Consider implementing fare-free transit (see #1 above)
- Implement an equitable congestion pricing program. Revenue could be used to cover the cost of fare-free transit.
- Expand our transit, bicycle, and walking networks. This would include a more aggressive approach to light rail expansion.
- Establish net-zero carbon building standards and schedule for implementation. We spend 90% of our time in buildings, which account for 32% of Seattle’s carbon emissions via heating and electricity consumption (18% commercial; 14% residential).

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?

Many areas north of N 85th that were annexed by the City long after incorporation lack sidewalks. Walkability and pedestrian safety, especially safe routes to schools, are important concerns that I have heard. The City has long promised more sidewalks but has not delivered, primarily due to cost (especially drainage requirements). Cost-effective pathways separated from the wider roadways in these outlying areas of the city may be a good alternative. I would pursue a dedicated funding source for such pathways.

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

I know there are some valuable partnerships to be built in the business community, and I look forward to engaging with them.

Both the Seattle Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and the Downtown Seattle Association (DSA) do important work in the community. While at the Department of Neighborhoods, I worked with DSA staff and downtown community members on several Neighborhood Matching Fund projects. Also, the DSA has been a good incubator partner in getting buy-in for the LID I-5 endeavor, which I strongly support as a way to build more affordable housing and job centers, create parks and open space, and reconnect downtown and nearby neighborhoods.

I would be proactive in seeking out opportunities to sit down and talk with business community members about current challenges and opportunities. The provision of affordable housing and solutions to homelessness and other issues facing us is a joint responsibility of individuals, the public sector, the private sector, and the community.

Other business and economic development measures that I would advocate include:
Using zoning, tax, and transportation policies to provide jobs and housing in centers throughout the city. This would help lessen pressure on the central downtown business district and make Seattle more economically resilient.

Creating new workplaces outside downtown - off the beaten path - often in old historic warehouses or in distinctive new architecture.

Creating public development authorities for small manufacturing spaces such as Pelington Village in Fremont/Westlake Ave.

Changing residential zoning to allow small makerspaces in neighborhoods. The Walsh Makerspace in Fort Worth, TX, for example, is a hub of tech education learning open to the community.

Supporting neighborhood business districts and the development of art districts and ecodistricts.

Making it easier for small business operators to acquire ownership of storefront properties rather than only being able to lease space. This would provide equity for people who previously faced barriers to wealth accumulation.

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?

Additional tools I would propose are either a high earned-income tax or a more progressive head (employee hours) tax in Seattle. I would also seek a reformed and more progressive tax structure in the state. Washington is only one of three states with a Business and Occupation tax, which is levied on gross income rather than net. This means that there are no deductions for labor, materials, taxes, or other costs of doing business.

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 think that many people are concerned and frustrated about homelessness in Seattle. It is all too easy to view homeless people as people apart from those who are housed. We face calls to criminalize panhandling, bulldoze encampments, increase arrests, close down meal programs, and impose entry requirements and drug tests in shelters. But the evidence overwhelmingly shows that punishing homeless people makes it harder for them to find housing and get work.

Homelessness is a regional problem. In King County, we who are housed see more and more homeless people on the streets. In 2018, for the first time, the number of people sleeping in camps, cars, and underpasses has overtaken the number of “sheltered” homeless. Of these, 22% are families with children, and 83% are from King County.

We can address homelessness in Seattle by -
-Significantly expanding shelter units and transitional housing using a Housing First approach. People who are homeless should be able to spend nights in safe places rather than along streets, sidewalks, and highways, under overpasses, and in parks and greenbelts. We should provide more City-sanctioned tiny house villages, safe vehicle lots, and other types of temporary housing in neighborhoods throughout the city. We should be willing to partner with businesses that step up to offer new models of transitional housing such as refurbished shipping containers. And we must streamline and modernize our permitting process so that these projects can be assembled over a matter of months.

-Enlisting neighborhood-based outreach workers and community members to provide homeless services. Our homeless population is very diverse. Young mothers with children become homeless because of domestic abuse; 36% of King County's homeless people have experienced domestic violence. Young men recently discharged from prison or foster care often become homeless. 40% of homeless youth identify as LGBTQ+. Services that need to be provided include rental assistance, eviction prevention, drug treatment, behavioral counseling, and free or subsidized child care.

Outreach workers and community members can partner with local business improvement districts to identify people experiencing chronic homelessness and build relationships over time, with the goal of getting them into services and off the street. They can work with schools to provide social workers for unhoused students. They can work with libraries to invite health care workers to help homeless patrons manage their chronic illnesses. They can work with law enforcement to focus on outreach and harm reduction rather than arrests and encampment sweeps. They can work with urban food staff to create or use community gardens at or near encampment sites that homeless people can help with and develop a sense of pride and purpose.

The humane and proven effective approach is to provide people who are homeless with shelter, housing, living wage jobs, and services and find ways to allow them feel worthy and experience dignity.

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)

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

I thought it was an imperfect yet well-intentioned attempt to provide major funding for affordable housing and services for people who are homeless. I would like to see it improved or re-tooled to provide funding for both housing and transit.

We have had experience with two Employee Hours Taxes (“head taxes”) in recent years: first, in 2006 with an EHT complementing a Commercial Parking Tax to fund transit; and last year’s proposed EHT to fund housing and homeless services. If we work hard with all stakeholders, including businesses, I think we can improve an EHT to make it more progressive by having more
graduated tiers, rather than just two as in the case of last year’s EHT proposal. Another option would be to look at a payroll tax. Even better and more progressive options to consider would be a business tax on net profit or some form of income tax (graduated, progressive income tax, or a tax on high wage earners) or capital gains tax.