



Jorge Báron Urbanist Questionnaire 2023

King County Council, District 4

Would you vote to put a countywide transportation benefit district geared at boosting Metro transit service on the ballot, as had been proposed in 2020?

Yes, I would. But I would recognize that a transportation benefit district that relies significantly or solely on an increase in sales taxes is going to exacerbate the regressive nature of the taxing structure that funds county government. I would therefore emphasize that any enhancement to Metro transit service that is funded through this regressive revenue mechanism would have to prioritize the needs of low-income communities that will disproportionately bear the cost of paying for service enhancements. I would also seek to generate new urgency with state legislators in creating more progressive revenue sources that will allow us to make needed investments like these in ways that will not disproportionately impact low-income communities.

As a King County Councilmember, there's a chance you'd be tapped to be on the Sound Transit Board of Directors. Would you seek such an assignment and how would you use such authority to improve outcomes?

Yes, I would seek such an assignment. I believe the councilmember for district 4 has a special obligation to pursue opportunities to work on regional issues because this district is the only one on the council that does not cover unincorporated areas of the county. I am also very interested in promoting policies that will improve our regional transit system, of which Sound Transit is a vital part. If I were to be selected in this role, I would take to heart the recommendations recently issued by the Technical Advisory Group on how to improve Sound Transit's decision making processes, to make sure the transit agency can be as effective as possible. I would understand that my role as board member is at a high level and not to micromanage the agency. At the same time, however, I would want to ensure that the agency is appropriately using an equity lens in its decision-making processes.

What do you view as the top priorities for King County Metro over the next five years? How would you work to solve Metro's bus operator shortage?



One of the top priorities for policy-makers to tackle is how to ensure that Metro has adequate, sustainable revenue streams to make the system effective, safe, and reliable in the years to come. I also recognize that the system needs to be ready to adapt to evolving community needs in light of the changes to mobility patterns that have resulted since the pandemic.

I of course also recognize that staffing shortages are a top priority to address since we're currently about to cut service primarily because of this issue. In order to address the shortages, we should be increasing compensation of drivers and other workers, something that has proven successful in other areas of the country (for instance, Los Angeles, which was recently able to recruit a large number of workers for its transit system through compensation increases and other incentives). I also believe that an important part of the answer when it comes to labor shortages at Metro and other public sector entities is the crisis of affordable child care in our region, which effectively makes it unaffordable for some potential workers to enter the workforce. In particular, for people who live outside of Seattle, the current structure of child care subsidies means that workers suddenly lose their subsidies when they earn just slightly above the income cap. This creates a situation where a worker may actually earn less (after considering child care costs) by working. I therefore believe that one part of the solution to our labor shortage is to address child care costs for people who are not currently eligible for subsidies.

Do you support redeveloping King County's campus in Downtown Seattle as proposed by County Executive Dow Constantine? What would be your primary goals in such a redevelopment?

Yes, I do support this proposal. I have worked for the past 16 years at an office only a couple of blocks from the county buildings and I know that there's tremendous opportunity to revitalize and reimagine the section of downtown that the county buildings currently occupy. I would like to see the county pursue options that would allow the existing space (which is in a prime location) to have a mix of residential and commercial uses, and especially one that integrates with the existing and forthcoming transit hubs in the area. I would push for the county to use the opportunity of redeveloping this area to include affordable housing options in the mix of residential options in the complex and retail shops and pedestrian areas that could draw people to downtown in the evenings (for instance for pre-Mariners or



Sounders game activities) and could also serve downtown office workers on that end of downtown.

Recent state legislation will substantially impact residential zoning in much of King County. What role if any should the county have in supporting and shaping equitable development?

I support the goals of HB1110 and see it as one of many policy tools we need to increase the availability of housing in our region. I believe the role the county can play as the implementation of this new policy continues is to work with partners at the city, state and federal government to ensure we have adequate resources to make sure people can actually afford housing. While I recognize that HB 1110 will be one part of the solution to the current shortage of housing in our region, I also recognize that even the more optimistic projections for this bill find that it will only generate a fraction of the hundreds of thousands of residential units our county will need over the next 20 years. I therefore think the county needs to be pro-active in identifying progressive revenue sources to support affordable housing for low- and even moderate-income families.

Historically, King County has often opted to contract with community-based organizations to provide social services (such as rental assistance, diversion services, etc). What do you think of this approach?

I should disclose that my response to this question is informed by the fact that I have worked for the past 17 years at one of the nonprofit organizations (Northwest Immigrant Rights Project) that provides social services to the community under contract with the county. In light of that experience, I believe there is a great deal of value in the existing approach of the county contracting with community-based organizations to provide social services but also a lot of room for improvement. The positive aspects are that community-based organizations are generally more responsive to often-changing urgent community needs and can better connect with communities that may be apprehensive in reaching out to government agencies (this is certainly true for immigrant and refugee communities).

But while the approach of contracting with community-based organizations can be positive, I have also seen examples of how it does not work well. For one, I have seen situations where county funding has gone to organizations that did not have



the internal capacity to manage government funding and which received little support to develop that capacity. I have also seen contracting practices by the county that effectively penalize organizations that compensate their employees better than other social services providers. This can lead to pressure within the human services sector to keep salaries low, which is ultimately short-sighted since it leads to constant turnover in those agencies.

I see significant ways that the county's approach to contracting with human services could be improved and look forward to using my experience as a nonprofit leader to help inform county policy-making in this area.

Seattle remains the primary funder of the King County Regional Homelessness Authority (KCRHA) while other cities in the region do not contribute directly. Do you support increasing funding to the KCRHA and, if so, how?

I do support increasing funding to the KCRHA because I think there is much more that we as a community can do to support our unhoused neighbors. I support the regional approach to address homelessness that was envisioned when the KCRHA was created but I also think that the problems with the implementation of that approach need to be addressed, particularly if we are going to generate political support for additional resources to the agency.

In terms of additional resources to support this work, I spent the past few months as part of a coalition of local leaders who advocated for the county to increase the rate of the Veterans, Seniors, and Human Services (VSHSL) levy that would have resulted in increased funding for a range of human services needs around the county, including providing additional resources for affordable housing and for services for unhoused people in our community. Unfortunately, despite receiving majority support in the county council, the rate increase was not adopted because it did not obtain the super-majority needed. I believe this was a missed opportunity but one that inspired my decision to enter the current county council race. (And to be clear, people should absolutely support the renewal of the levy when it is before them in August, I just wish they had had the opportunity to vote on a proposal that would go farther). One of my top priorities in pursuing this position is to build the type of coalition that will be necessary to secure progressive revenue sources to support county services in the future and the lifting of the current state revenue restrictions that substantially hinder the ability of the county to make needed investments in a



range of issue areas. As a councilmember, I also would use my position to create greater accountability for the KCRHA in order to help create the space to seek greater support from suburban cities in the county for a regional approach.

In 2018, the King County Affordable Housing Task Force [reported](#) that the County needs about a quarter million net new affordable homes by 2040 to address the housing affordability crisis. Since then we're nowhere near that trajectory. How can the County boost affordable housing production?

One of the critical ways to increase affordable housing production is for the county to develop progressive sources of revenue that will support increased investments in this area. As I noted above, this was one of the reasons that a coalition of community leaders and organizations were calling on the county council to increase the rate of the VSHSL, to increase the amount of resources available to make investments on affordable housing. I plan on using the platform that I would have as a county councilmember to build coalitions that will create the political space for state legislators to make changes to current state law that restricts revenue options for the county, and use these resources to increase investments in affordable housing, particularly for people and families with incomes in the range of 30-50% of Area Median Income (AMI).

What are your top public health priorities for your potential term?

I will bring a broad approach to what public health means. Here are some areas where the county will need to continue to prioritize resources and attention in the coming years.

First and most obviously, the COVID-19 pandemic is not over, and we will need to continue to focus attention on the ongoing impacts of the pandemic, but also to evaluate what we experienced in the past few years and better prepare for the next pandemic. I am particularly concerned about the disproportionate impact the pandemic had on communities of color in our county, particularly during the first year of the pandemic. We must understand that some of the interventions some of us had access to (like working from home) were not available to many community members and this should inform our preparedness for future pandemics, which are inevitable.



Second, we must focus renewed urgency on the epidemic of substance use disorders and especially the dramatic rise in overdoses from fentanyl. I am disappointed that we as a state are continuing to center the criminal legal system as the solution to a public health crisis rather than focus resources more heavily on approaches that research show to be more effective in keeping our neighbors safe. But I will use my role as councilmember to support policies that will address substance use disorders as the public health crisis that it is.

Third, I am excited about the opportunity the county has to improve access to behavioral health supports due to the passage of crisis care centers levy, a proposal I strongly supported. The work ahead will be to ensure that the implementation of this new system is done effectively and equitably, so communities across the county have meaningful access to this new resource.

Fourth, gun violence is another epidemic that we must tackle with urgency. I am encouraged by the steps the state legislature took to address access to guns, and especially those with the most lethal potential. But I believe the county has a role to play from a public health approach to promote work at the community level that will reduce the incidence of gun violence.

Fifth, it is clear that we will have to step up in the coming years our responses to address the impact that our changing climate is having on local communities. We need to prepare for how we will mitigate the impacts of excessive heat and smoke on county residents, especially those who are not able to protect themselves from these impacts, even as we continue to make decisions to reduce our county's own contributions toward the climate crisis.

How would you work to eliminate jail deaths in King County facilities?

My approach to this issue is centered on the value that if we as a community make a decision to deprive one of our neighbors of their liberty and place them in jail, we become responsible for ensuring their safety. Right now, we are not living up to this value.

It has been clear for some time that a confluence of factors have created a situation in which we do not currently have the staffing at the county jails to ensure the safety of people inside. In light of that, I believe we need to take emergency steps to



reduce the number of people in the jail to a level that would allow us to ensure we can adequately care for people deprived of their liberty. Given the current situation, I would support booking restrictions that have been advocated for by corrections staff and public defenders to help ensure adequate staffing levels. I also think we need to redouble the urgency and pressure on the state to address the backlogs in care for people in jail who are awaiting competency restoration services provided by the state.

In the longer-term, I remain concerned that the current austerity budget cycle will see the county continuing to invest an increasing share of the general fund on the criminal legal system while cutting back on the community supports that evidence shows can actually reduce the incidence of criminal behavior. As I noted earlier, one of my priorities will be to identify progressive revenue sources that will enable the county to invest in evidence-based restorative justice initiatives.