



Ryan Mello Urbanist Questionnaire 2024

Pierce County Executive

What is your vision for how Pierce County should grow in the coming decades?

What does a livable community look like to you and how do you plan to ensure the County is doing enough to create these kinds of communities?

Both in my roles as a Pierce County Councilmember and Executive Director of the Pierce Conservation District, I've seen firsthand that there are challenges facing our region that no one jurisdiction can tackle on their own. They demand regional cooperation and strong leadership at the county-wide level.

The key elements of my vision for growth in the county is centered on smart growth and carefully planned development. We must adopt smart growth principles to concentrate development in urban centers and designated growth areas. By promoting higher-density, mixed-use developments, we can create vibrant, walkable communities that reduce sprawl over our working landscapes and rural areas and help us preserve our natural landscapes. Smart growth requires active community engagement - especially from our established, rural community members. We will ensure that all voices are heard in the planning process, especially the voices of those from historically marginalized communities. Our growth strategy must prioritize creating a dynamic and resilient economy. We will support local businesses, attract new industries, and invest in workforce development and education. By promoting innovation and entrepreneurship, we can create well-paying jobs and ensure our economy remains competitive.

Investing in a comprehensive public transit system is essential. Expanding bus and light rail services and developing transit-oriented communities will reduce traffic congestion, lower emissions, and make our county more accessible for all residents. Ensuring that all residents have access to affordable, quality housing is a priority. I will seek to implement policies that encourage the development of affordable housing, support first-time homebuyers, and prevent displacement - especially of our senior citizens. By fostering diverse, inclusive communities, we can ensure that Pierce County remains a place where everyone can thrive.



Finally, protecting our natural environment is critical for our future. We will prioritize green building practices, renewable energy projects, and conservation efforts. Preserving open spaces, parks, and waterways will enhance our quality of life and ensure that future generations can enjoy the natural beauty of Pierce County. As we grow, we must also prepare for future challenges. Investing in resilient infrastructure, emergency preparedness, and climate adaptation strategies will help us withstand and recover from natural disasters and other crises.

My vision for how we grow includes ensuring our neighborhoods are complete and connected.- complete with parks, open spaces, sidewalks, street lights, bike lanes, transit service and are safe, attractive and where most communities can be connected to services.

By focusing on all these pillars, Pierce County can grow sustainably and inclusively, becoming a model for other regions. As Pierce County Executive, my vision is to create a thriving, equitable, and resilient community that meets the needs of all its residents while preserving the unique character and natural beauty of our county.

Given that 446,000 people live in unincorporated Pierce County, how will you manage growth in these areas? How should the County curb sprawl and encourage urbanization and transit use in unincorporated areas of the County?

Managing growth in unincorporated Pierce County requires a thoughtful, community-centered approach to ensure sustainable development, prevent sprawl, and promote urbanization and transit use. We need to create and enforce comprehensive land use plans that prioritize smart growth principles. This involves concentrating development in designated urban growth areas, preserving open spaces, and protecting agricultural and environmentally sensitive lands. By planning for residential, commercial, and recreational spaces, we can reduce the need for long commutes, promote local businesses, and build more cohesive neighborhoods.



Zoning reforms are essential to manage growth and promote urbanization. We should update zoning codes to allow for higher-density housing in appropriate areas, support the development of affordable housing, and streamline the permitting process for sustainable building projects. Focusing on transit-oriented development can encourage urbanization and make public transit more viable. By developing housing, retail, and office spaces near transit hubs, we can create convenient, attractive alternatives to car-dependent lifestyles. As we manage growth, it's crucial to invest in the infrastructure and services that support thriving communities. This includes upgrading roads, utilities, and public amenities, as well as ensuring that schools, healthcare facilities, and recreational spaces meet the needs of growing populations.

Our conservation programs must be more robust to properly compensate working land owners for their real estate value while conserving their working lands, habitat and recreational lands. Through better planning, more complete and connected communities and more robust conservation programs we can turn the tide of Pierce County being the poster child for the genesis of the Growth Management Act.

What policies would you put forth to address historic inequities and move towards a more equitable Pierce County?

I have advanced policies that have increased access and influence of historically marginalized communities for the LGBTQ community, people of color, women, low income people and others through initiatives such as non-discrimination laws, domestic partnerships, marriage equality, paid sick and safe leave, minimum wage increases, co-sponsoring the establishment of the Office of Equity & Empowerment at the City of Tacoma, supporting the improvement of apprenticeship policies, contracting for minority and women-owned businesses and much more.

As a County Councilmember, I have worked hard to make my district more equitable for the LGBTQ+ community, people of color and people with disabilities in several ways. These efforts include:

- Prime sponsor of a Pierce County Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Commission to evaluate policies and procedures with an equity lens and implement an equity framework for all investments and operations (vetoed by the current County Executive).
- Bringing a strong equity lens to my own decision-making process



- Ensure we log diversity elements for appointments at Pierce County so that when making various appointments to Boards, Commissions and other decision-making bodies we can see how diverse (or not diverse) the current body and applicant pool is and with that knowledge steer decisions with equity, diversity and inclusion at the center.

- Prime sponsor a bill to remove the inaccurate and racist use of the E-Verify system for county contractors of all kinds (vetoed by the current County Executive).

- I will continue my strong relationships with leaders in the LGBTQ+ community, people of color and people with disabilities to ensure I am well aware of the major issues facing these communities and always discussing how Pierce County may be a better partner in delivering equitable services. I will continue to ensure these communities have easy and regular access to decision-makers to make sure their voices are heard loud and clear and included in decision-making. As Pierce County Executive, I will go to these communities regularly - not wait for them to come to me.

When I am County Executive, we will revisit these initiatives passed by our current County Council, but vetoed by the current County Executive. We will work on many more ways to use our new Equity Index and Equity Note (like a fiscal note) process that evaluates all policies for equity impacts to ensure we are lifting up all Pierce County communities, not just a wealthy few.

How will you ensure youth are able to thrive in Pierce County, from education to transportation to access to opportunity?

My primary strategy for increasing opportunities for young people aligns with my vision for a prosperous and robust local economy in the South Puget Sound region. A good economy is one where businesses can thrive, and everyone has access to a good, family-wage job to provide for their family and invest in their future. I am committed to focusing on helping our small businesses thrive and keeping working people employed. I will also invest in affordable, quality childcare so that parents can work while supporting a family. In a changing workplace with increased remote work and automation, I will invest in people's skills so they can compete in this changing economy. We will protect good, family-wage jobs and ensure people who work hard and play by the rules can earn a decent wage, with benefits, and be able to retire with dignity.



As I led the County Council through the 2024 – 2025 Biennial Budget process, I was able to pass several initiatives that specifically address the health and future of our youth. The new budget creates the position of, “Children and Families Coordinator,” to facilitate work with the Birth to 25 Advisory Board, school districts, parks, youth-focused non-profits, the Health Department, and other groups to establish and maintain a robust support network for the county’s youth and young adults. I was also able to help allocate \$2 million for young adult internship and employment programs and Youth Drop-In Educational activities. This is an expansion of the Council-supported Teen Late Night Program from the 2023 summer that provided a safe and fun space for teens to gather and hang out during summer break. The Summer Teen Late Night Program will be continued.

I am also committed to addressing underlying issues that cause young people to get in trouble with the law, by investing in education and youth programs. For example, the County currently invests \$3.9 million in the Youth Violence Prevention program. Pierce County also partners with community organizations to support programs like Teen Late Nights and youth paid-internship programs. Our youth can make more positive choices when they are provided with accessible and equitable quality recreational and educational opportunities. As Pierce County Executive, I will continue to advocate for the health and safety of our young people, who are the future of our communities.

With safer neighborhoods, better access to transit to get to opportunities, more paid internship and work experiences and better starts through high quality childcare and other services, we will invest in young people and make Pierce County an amazing place to raise a family and grow up.

What are your priorities around transportation? Do you support Pierce Transit’s vision for a bus rapid transit network and if so how would you bring it about?



As a member of the Pierce County Council, I serve on the Pierce Transit Board of Commissioners and have done so for seven years now. I also served on a non-profit Board of Directors, Transportation Choices Coalition, whose mission is to advocate for policies and funding that improve public transportation in Washington state. I support going to the voters to increase revenues for Pierce Transit to deliver more service hours - especially earlier in the day and late into the night for shift workers and more frequent service so that it is reliable and convenient for more riders. I also have advocated for and support the additional strategies we have deployed to ensure the system is more reliable and safer for all riders. These include initiatives such as hiring incentives for operators, better contracts for Pierce County employees so we are competitive in the marketplace, our new alternative crisis response staff to keep the system safe, upgraded bus shelters and new programs such as the Runner service and other initiatives. I have also championed the use of ORCA Lift (low-income fare program) at Pierce Transit and a system redesign that better meets the needs of most riders. My priorities are to connect the communities of Pierce County with effective transit service and to build out our bus rapid transit network. I do support building out our bus rapid transit network.

We will bring about the bus rapid transit network by working early and collaboratively with cities on planning and permitting and advocating for resources at the state and federal level to make the network a reality.

What does a Vision Zero campaign to end traffic deaths look like to you and what will you do to fund and achieve that?

We have too many people being hit by cars or trucks and killed or seriously injured in Pierce County and we must make serious change to make our transportation system safer for all users. A Vision Zero campaign to end traffic deaths and serious injuries is a comprehensive, community-driven approach to ensure that every road user - whether pedestrian, cyclist, or driver - is safe. To me, it means implementing a multifaceted strategy that prioritizes human life and equity in our transportation system. I was honored to be the prime sponsor of a bill to direct Pierce County's Public Works Department to begin a Vision Zero planning effort and we also received a federal grant to resource this effort.



All elements of Vision Zero are important to me. First, it involves redesigning our streets to prioritize safety. This includes implementing more pedestrian crosswalks, protected bike lanes, and traffic calming measures such as roundabouts and speed humps. We must also enhance visibility at intersections and improve signage and lighting to reduce accidents.

Education is another crucial component. We need to invest in public awareness campaigns that educate all road users about safe practices and the importance of sharing the road responsibly. This should be coupled with stronger enforcement of traffic laws to deter dangerous behaviors like speeding and distracted driving. Technology can also play a significant role. Investing in smart traffic signals that adapt to real-time conditions and using data analytics to identify high-risk areas can help prevent accidents before they happen.

By engaging the community, listening to their needs, and working collaboratively with city planners, law enforcement, and public health experts, we can create a safer, more equitable transportation system for everyone. Ultimately, achieving Vision Zero requires a committed, sustained effort from the Pierce County Executive to transform our transportation infrastructure and culture. With bold leadership and a clear focus on protecting lives, we can make our streets safer for all. Our transportation investments must match the importance of this priority and I plan on putting Transportation Improvement Programs (the County's Transportation Budget) that meet this priority with significant new investments.

How will you shift the current dynamic and challenges regarding homelessness funding between the Executive and Council?

We will continue the work the County Council has started to bring all cities and towns together to develop a Unified Regional Approach to addressing homelessness. We need more cooperation in planning, response, governance and resourcing the homelessness response and prevention system. We will design a strategy that brings many more communities along to take responsibility for the challenges and have a stronger stake at addressing root causes of homelessness and preventing and mitigating its effects.



What steps should the County take to expand renter protections in unincorporated Pierce County?

Expanding renter protections in unincorporated Pierce County requires a proactive, community-focused approach to ensure that all residents have safe, stable, and affordable housing. I support efforts at the state level to thoughtfully bring balance and protections for renters and provide rent stabilization and rental assistance so renters can stay in their homes and landlords can continue providing housing to renters.

We must invest in legal aid services to help renters understand and assert their rights. Providing educational resources and workshops can empower tenants to navigate the rental market and protect themselves from unfair practices. During the development of our biennial budget, I was proud to ensure Tacoma Pro Bono had the resources to provide legal aid services to those who need it.

And finally, a strategy for expanding affordable housing stock is crucial. The County Council should incentivize the development of affordable units through zoning changes, tax credits, and public-private partnerships. Additionally, preserving existing affordable housing through grants and low-interest loans for repairs can keep more homes within reach for low-income families. I was proud to be the prime sponsor of the Maureen Howard Affordable Housing Act - which dedicates \$20 M (in 2023 dollars) to preservation development of new, permanently affordable housing units.

By taking these steps, the Pierce County Executive can lead the County Council toward establishing a fairer, more secure housing environment for renters in unincorporated Pierce County. Through collaborative efforts and community engagement, we can build a stronger, more resilient housing market that works for everyone.

The Pierce County Executive automatically gets a seat on the Sound Transit Board of Directors and gets to appoint the county's members; in what direction would you seek to steer the agency? How would you make decisions about which Pierce County elected officials should join you on the board?



I will steer the agency toward one that is accountable to tax payers and serves all parts of the region well. Pierce County has been waiting a very long time for a lightrail connection to the airport and we will ensure it gets accomplished. We will work hard to expand Sounder Train services all the way to DuPont and perform more frequent service as well as protecting and expanding Sounder Express Bus Service to Tacoma, Lakewood, DuPont, Gig Harbor and Puyallup.

I will appoint Sound Transit Board members who have vision and are passionate about the power of transit to connect people to opportunity. I will also look for Board Members who understand that we are governing a tri-county agency that needs to be built for the benefit of the region while advocating fiercely for Pierce County's interests.