



Girmay Zahilay Urbanist Questionnaire 2025

King County Executive

What are your top three priorities to achieve in your term?

As Executive, I will focus on our region's most urgent issues and priorities: housing, public safety, and a worker-focused economy. These are not siloed issues. They shape how people live, move, and connect. Tackling them with bold action is essential to making King County livable and affordable for everyone. I will expand emergency and non-congregate shelters, strengthen tenant protections, and overhaul permitting and zoning to accelerate the creation of affordable housing so more people can live near transit, schools, and opportunity. I'll reform our criminal justice system, invest in prevention through youth programs, community violence intervention, and behavioral health care. That includes accelerating the Crisis Care Centers I helped launch so people in crisis receive timely, compassionate care close to where they live. And I'll continue to advocate for liveable wages, expand union jobs, create an Office of Labor Standards, and invest in reliable mass public transit and in future-focused green jobs. When people earn fair wages and live near opportunity, we reduce inequality, displacement, and emissions. My vision is a King County where everyone, in every corner of our region, has access to a stable home, a good job, and a safe, connected neighborhood to call home.

What policies or initiatives are you most excited to carry forward and implement from the last administration? Looking at the actions of the county executive from the last four years, what would you as county executive have done differently?

I'll build on key efforts from the last administration like Crisis Care Centers and investments in transit-oriented development, but as Executive, I'll go further and



move faster. Housing and homelessness will be the defining priority of my administration.

We'll deliver 17,000 units of shelter and emergency housing, with a focus on non-congregate models like tiny house villages. I'll accelerate permanent supportive housing, scale partnerships with nonprofit and labor-led builders, and use surplus public land to reduce costs and time. I'll overhaul permitting systems, eliminate unnecessary barriers, and push for zoning reforms that allow deeply affordable housing near transit, schools, and jobs.

I'll also redirect administrative overhead into frontline outreach, expand prevention tools like rental assistance and tenant protections, and hold every city accountable for helping meet our regional housing needs.

I believe a rising tide must lift all ships and that starts with housing. When people have a safe place to live, they're more likely to succeed at work, access care, and participate in community life. That's good for everyone.

We can't keep accepting slow, incremental progress. I'll bring urgency, structure, and relentless follow-through to finally get this crisis under control and move King County forward.

Do you support adding progressive revenue sources? Which ones would you support to fund your priorities? Or what cuts would you make to balance budgets facing increasing strain under Trump? How have federal funding cuts impacted your jurisdiction and how do you plan to address those impacts?



I strongly support progressive revenue to sustainably fund our priorities without overburdening working people. Our tax code is deeply inequitable, and I've consistently advocated for fairer tools.

As Council Budget Chair, I testified in Olympia urging state leaders to lift the 1% cap and expand revenue options. I'm the only candidate in this race who publicly signed a letter calling for exploring new revenue tools. Because of that advocacy and our work with state partners, King County now has authority to raise sales tax by 0.1% for public safety. While regressive taxes aren't ideal, I urged Executive Braddock to implement this temporary measure to preserve critical health and safety services.

Federal funding cuts have hit King County hard, jeopardizing nearly \$200 million annually. State cuts, like the \$8.5 million reduction to our Abortion Access Project, have made matters worse. I led efforts to explore legal and financial strategies to prevent service loss.

As Executive, I'll continue advocating for progressive reform. But I'll also do more with what we have: reprioritizing budgets, cutting inefficiencies, and using every tool available to protect core services. That's what I've done as Budget Chair and it's how I'll lead in the Executive's office.

Governor Bob Ferguson has been resistant to lifting the 1% property tax lift cap, which has depleted King County resources over the past 25 years. How would you lobby to get this lid lifted or find alternative funding sources to overcome this limitation?

The 1% property tax cap has severely limited King County's ability to fund essential services for over two decades. As Council Budget Chair, I testified in Olympia to lift the cap and restore the resources we need and I'll continue that advocacy as



Executive. Lifting the cap will be a top legislative priority. I'll work with cities, counties, and legislators to push for reform and find reasonable compromises. But to succeed, we need more than political alignment, we need public momentum. I'll lead a grassroots education campaign to explain what's at stake. Lifting the cap doesn't mean massive tax hikes; it means restoring local control so communities can meet today's needs. I'll work with the Budget Director to hold public sessions and town halls, breaking down the impacts clearly and transparently, just as I've done before. Public trust starts with honesty and access to information. While we push for long-term reform, I'll pursue creative alternatives like my workforce housing initiative, which uses our bonding capacity to build rent-restricted homes for essential workers. If the state won't act, we won't wait. I'll lead with urgency, transparency, and the commitment to meet the needs of our communities no matter the fiscal barriers in our way.

What do you think is the most important strategy King County can pursue to make the region affordable to live in? How will you boost housing options, particularly for families of all incomes to live near where they work? How will you expand shelter space, emergency housing, and permanent supportive housing? How would you go about implementing that strategy?

To make King County more affordable, we must dramatically increase housing supply at all income levels, especially near jobs and transit, by investing public dollars, removing bureaucratic barriers, reforming zoning, and leading with a regional, pro-housing strategy.

As Council Budget Chair, I secured tens of millions for transit-oriented development and launched the Regional Workforce Housing Initiative to leverage bonding capacity and build \$1 billion in rent-restricted housing for essential workers. I also



led efforts to streamline permitting and support zoning reforms, including my missing middle housing legislation to expand density in urban areas.

We must scale shelter and emergency housing, especially non-congregate options like tiny house villages, with a countywide goal of 17,000 new beds. Permanent supportive housing must grow in tandem, alongside tenant protections and rental assistance that keep people housed.

Affordability is a regional issue. I'll ensure every city does its part to meet housing goals through coordinated planning, funding, and accountability.

I led the transfer of surplus government land to build the Youth Achievement Center creating 100 units for unhoused youth. That's what results look like. As Executive, I'll lead with urgency and collaboration to deliver housing, not just talk about it.

How will you get the King County Regional Homelessness Authority on course?

How will you expand shelter space, emergency housing, and permanent supportive housing so that fewer people go unsheltered or unhoused?

The King County Regional Homelessness Authority must become more accountable, coordinated, and focused on delivering results. As someone who experienced homelessness as a child, I understand the urgency of this crisis and I'm committed to leading with compassion, measurable outcomes, and public trust.

As Executive, I will restructure KCRHA leadership to prioritize reducing unsheltered homelessness and rebuilding confidence in the system. That includes setting SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-Bound) goals, conducting independent performance audits, and making clear, transparent course corrections when progress stalls.



My plan includes creating 17,000 new emergency housing beds by expanding non-congregate shelter options like tiny house villages and partnering with state, federal, and private sources to scale permanent supportive housing. I'll redirect resources from duplicative administrative functions to frontline outreach, getting more boots on the ground to build trust and connect people to care.

We'll also improve coordination across the continuum of care, from outreach to permanent housing, so that no one falls through the cracks. That includes investing in mobile crisis response, behavioral health services, and proven prevention tools like rental assistance, tenant protections, and youth supports.

Everyone deserves a safe place to sleep and a path to stability. I'll work every day to make that a reality.

What is your approach to improving public safety over the next five years? How will you actualize it?

I grew up in public housing in South Seattle and experienced homelessness. Public safety wasn't abstract, it meant losing friends and neighbors to gun violence. Today, I still receive calls from grieving families in the same neighborhoods I now represent. That lived experience grounds my approach to building real safety: not just policing, but prevention, healing, and opportunity. Over the next five years, I'll lead a coordinated, countywide strategy centered on prevention, intervention, and accountability. I'll appoint a Cabinet-level Public Safety Director to coordinate across departments and lead neighborhood safety workgroups. Agencies like Public Health, Metro, and Human Services will help shape strategies that reflect how people actually experience safety in daily life. We'll invest in community-based violence prevention, scale outreach programs like JustCARE and REACH, and expand crisis response teams that de-escalate and connect people to care. Police



will be trained, overseen, and supported to focus on serious crimes, while non-police responders handle behavioral health and substance use crises. We'll also expand recovery programs, housing, youth mentorship, and job pathways to break the cycle of violence before it starts. My five-point gun violence strategy combines data, lived experience, and coordination to save lives. Safety must be real and felt in every neighborhood.

How do you plan to improve public safety for transit operators and riders, and boost ridership and transit accessibility? What is your approach to making our streets safer for all users, especially with pedestrian traffic deaths rising?

Transit riders and operators deserve to be and feel safe. I prioritized this issue as Budget Chair by creating the Community Safety Ambassadors Program, which places trusted community members at high-incident stations. I also championed Metro's SaFE Reform Initiative to increase safety strategies on buses. As Executive, I will expand behavioral health programs linked to transit, deploy mobile safety teams, and station outreach workers at high-need hubs. We must also ensure rapid response from first responders when needed.

Operators must feel safe too. They are not social workers, yet are often expected to respond to the effects of homelessness, addiction, and mental illness. We must provide real support, including enclosed operator barriers, emergency communication tools, de-escalation training, and better lighting.

I will lead a coordinated plan with cities to redesign dangerous roads, prioritizing the safety of pedestrians, cyclists, and transit riders. I will also improve station infrastructure so transit feels safe and accessible at all hours.



These challenges are showing up on transit because we have failed to address them elsewhere. Public safety begins with community well-being. That is why I will invest in housing, behavioral health, and crisis response beyond the transit system.

Transit electrification plans are straining King County Metro's budget and could lead to fewer service hours and thus less ridership and more climate pollution overall as more residents drive or ride hail to work. How would you approach these tradeoffs?

Transit electrification is essential to achieving our climate goals, but it cannot come at the cost of service, especially for communities who rely on transit most. If electrification results in fewer service hours, we risk pushing more people into cars, increasing emissions, and undermining our environmental progress. As Executive, I'll pursue a phased, equity-centered approach that protects ridership and service coverage while transitioning our fleet. Climate justice means sustainability and accessibility must move together. To support this, I'll advocate for stable funding through a transportation benefit district so Metro can maintain service while electrifying responsibly. We'll deploy electric buses where they make the most operational and financial sense, while using hybrid or clean diesel vehicles where necessary in the near term to prevent service cuts. Transit workers will be essential partners. I'll work closely with unions to ensure electrification protects jobs, supports a just transition, and strengthens workforce pathways. Ultimately, we must reduce emissions per dollar spent—not just through cleaner vehicles, but by ensuring more people choose fast, reliable public transit. A strong climate strategy doesn't shrink service. It expands it. We can electrify our fleet and grow ridership at the same time.

King County has good policies and codes designed to protect agricultural, forest and rural lands, including our natural areas, waterways, and small rural communities. However, these policies and codes are too often not upheld and



enforced. How will you ensure that rural lands are protected, and that violators are subject to enforcement?

King County has strong policies to protect agricultural, forest, and rural lands, but policies alone aren't enough. Without consistent enforcement, adequate staffing, and clear accountability, violations go unchecked, and trust in local government erodes. As Executive, I'll increase enforcement capacity by fully staffing the departments responsible for oversight, including Permitting, Environmental Review, and Local Services. We'll clarify codes to remove loopholes, make expectations easier to follow, and equip staff to proactively identify violations, respond quickly, and hold violators accountable. I'll push for tighter timelines and meaningful penalties so that damaging protected lands isn't treated as a cost of doing business. Public reporting tools will be improved to make it easier for residents to flag issues and track outcomes transparently. We'll also partner with rural communities, Tribes, and conservation organizations to guide enforcement priorities and update policies. Protecting our lands must be a collaborative effort that honors local expertise and lived experience. Preserving rural and natural lands isn't just about open space, it's about safeguarding clean water, food systems, biodiversity, and the character of rural communities for future generations. We must do more than write good policy; we must uphold it with the same urgency we bring to any other crisis.

What are your views on the SeaTac Sustainable Airport Master Plan and how will it impact the communities that live around the airport? What plans do you have to address those community concerns?

The Sea-Tac Sustainable Airport Master Plan (SAMP) is one of the most consequential planning decisions in our region. Expansion must serve the region's mobility and economic needs without sacrificing the health, stability, or



environmental rights of surrounding communities—many of whom are my own friends and family.

For decades, South King County residents, primarily low-income, immigrant, and BIPOC, have absorbed the harms of airport operations: poor air quality, chronic noise exposure, and rising traffic, with limited mitigation or say in the process. That's not sustainable, and it's not just.

I co-created the Joint Aircraft Emissions Task Force, ensuring airport emissions were included in King County's Strategic Climate Action Plan. I'm proud to be endorsed by all Port of Seattle Commissioners, and I'll partner with them to implement enforceable pollution standards, invest in noise and air quality monitoring, and fund home insulation, tree canopy restoration, and public health interventions.

We must also invest in multimodal transportation, improve airport access, and reduce vehicle dependency region-wide.

Communities near Sea-Tac deserve more than lip service. They deserve a role in shaping a future that is equitable, climate-smart, and community-led. I'll lead with transparency, accountability, and a commitment to environmental justice that puts people first.

The King County Executive is the most influential seat on the Sound Transit Board of Directors, appointing members for half of the seats. How would you wield this power and your influence on Sound Transit decision making? What is your approach to keep light rail projects with ballooning budgets and drifting scope on course and relatively on time?



I will use my appointment power to transform the Sound Transit Board into a body focused on delivering projects on time, on budget, and with community trust. I'll appoint board members who bring experience delivering large infrastructure, who ride transit, and who understand the stakes for working people and the climate. Board members must treat project delivery not as a side responsibility but as the core of the job.

To prevent ballooning budgets and drifting timelines, I'll push for a major governance shift: project scopes must be clearly defined early and rigorously maintained. I'll push for independent audits, enforceable timelines, and transparent public progress reports to hold leadership accountable. We'll stop the cycle of late-stage redesigns and cost escalation by engaging communities and jurisdictions at the front end, not after decisions have been made.

I will also align the Board's focus with land use, permitting, and interagency coordination to remove delivery bottlenecks. My goal is for Sound Transit to function not just as a vision-setting agency, but as a high-performing delivery institution.

Voters deserve more than a promise of expansion; they deserve a transit system that gets built, works for all, and earns public trust through execution. That's the standard I'll lead with every day.