

Socially Responsible Development: Candidate Questionnaire

Submitted by Kshama Sawant for Seattle City Council, Position 2

1. ***Socially responsible development:** Seattle takes a strong stance in favor of environmentally sustainable development. Do you believe that Seattle also encourages socially responsible development? What does socially responsible development mean to you, and in the absence of any policy incentives, how does it come about? How can it be encouraged with policy?*

Socially responsible development takes into account the unique situation, needs, and voices of under-served communities in sculpting and carrying out plans to build housing, businesses, schools, hospitals, public buildings, and public spaces; expanding social services; implementing laws and regulations; deciding where funding should be allocated; and other aspects of economic development. Sculpting and carrying out plans for development in a socially responsible manner means acknowledging where the greatest needs exist, respecting cultural and ethnic diversity, upholding civil and human rights without exception, and prioritizing the interests of working people and the poor over the interests of corporations and the wealthy.

Seattle certainly has reasons to tout its green credentials in development plans, but oftentimes this is accomplished at the expense of the welfare of the already most marginalized communities in Seattle, particularly communities of color, low-income people, and the homeless. However, community development that is environmentally sustainable as well as socially sustainable is not mutually exclusive, but in fact can compliment one another nicely where political will and prioritization exists. The city needs to explore policies that will encourage economic development that will serve underprivileged communities while being earth-friendly as well, and adequately fund these projects. This is only likely to happen if communities in Seattle build campaigns to pressure their elected officials into taking concrete action in favor of people's actual needs. The role of my independent campaign for city council is to give working class people this political power and expression in a leadership structure otherwise completely dominated by Democrats friendly to big business and the rich.

2. *Negative outcomes: What trends accompanying growth and development in other cities, or in Seattle's history, do you hope Seattle will avoid in future development cycles? What brought you to live in Seattle? What aspects of growth do you believe bring about fear of loss? How can Seattle avoid negative outcomes?*

Growth and development in Seattle has unfortunately been accompanied by a process of gentrification, whereby people of color, the impoverished, and struggling workers have been pushed out of city centers due to a combination of poverty wages and unaffordable rent, the latter which has jumped by 15 percent in the last two years. Policies hostile to working people have been crafted by the Democratic Party city establishment, to ensure development will not benefit those who need it most. My

incumbent opponent, Richard Conlin, has given corporations like Amazon and Paul Allen's Vulcan real estate company first dibs to prime real-estate land in Seattle, instead of using these properties to build high-quality and eco-friendly public housing. City officials also continue to grease the path for real-estate corporations to buy up rental buildings and increase rents 45% to 90%, in what has been dubbed "reno-victions".

If big business interests have their way, then development in Seattle will accompany artificial increases in costs of living. What the city must do instead is cut big business out of negotiations over housing and real estate. The priority should first lie in meeting real human needs, which practically translates to using the income the city will obtain from a Millionaire's Tax and eliminating corporate tax loopholes to build environmentally sustainable, high-quality, subsidized public housing en masse. These homes and apartments should be placed all over the city so that workers can live close to their workplaces and students close to their schools. Public transit terminals and bus lines should be erected near these public housing units, and small businesses incentivized to set up shop in these neighborhoods.

The construction of quality public housing should be a part of a broader city jobs program to put thousands of employed people back to work, and at living wages. In addition, rents must be frozen and rent control enacted so that working class families can afford to stay in the homes they already have.

In fact, before new housing is built, the city should look at all the empty housing units that currently exist in Seattle because people cannot afford to live in them or have been evicted from them. These units should be filled up first, which forces the city to address the problem of Seattle's wages and costs of living.

- 3. Process: How do you rate Seattle's speed in response to demand for housing? How can Seattle improve upon existing planning policy and process (Comprehensive Plan; Design Review; Planning Commission; etc.)? What are the benefits and shortcomings of the "Seattle process"? If you would modify the planning or permitting process in any way, please cite positive and/or negative examples from other cities. Are there any specific precedents from Seattle or other cities that you view as a model of civic and private partnership in the built environment?*

Seattle has stellar response time to demand for housing in more wealthy neighborhoods, and catered to more wealthy clients, but not in response to the need for quality low-income housing. This is the inevitable result of a Democratic Party-dominated city establishment that has unapologetically taken campaign donations from developers and construction groups like Paul Allen's Vulcan, Martin Selig Real Estate, Vance Corp., Tarragon LLC, Builders United and American Civil Contractors, many through the PAC "Forward Seattle."

The biggest flaw in existing planning policy is its lack of focus on economic and infrastructure development in low-income neighborhoods in Seattle, in other words

where the greatest human needs exist. Connected to that is the lack of community voices in bodies like the Seattle Planning Commission, which is overwhelmingly dominated by urban planners who have no connection to the underserved communities that their policy recommendations will affect. These policy-crafting bodies should be composed of professional planners, but also community organizers and leaders from organizations that serve vulnerable populations or advocate for equity in housing, transit, health care, and social services.

The “Seattle Process” promotes transparency, open debate/discussion, accountability, and community participation in policy-making processes. This in some ways has democratized the process, although with the limit of monied influences that big business has over city officials. There are some models that Seattle should explore, such as participatory budgeting, which allows public money to be managed in a more democratic and accountable way because community members can directly decide how to spend public budgets. This model was first used in Brazil in 1989, and have spread to 1,500 cities, municipalities and institutions around the world.

4. *Building Typologies: What do you believe is the right mix of parking and building typologies in Seattle in the next 10 years? If you anticipate reduced car ownership and/or increased density, please discuss potential changes in how Seattleites access nature and the outdoors.*

Examples of building typologies include:

- *Single Family*
- *Small lot/ADUs*
- *Rowhouse or cottage housing*
- *Townhomes*
- *Midrise developments (45' to 85')*
- *High rise developments*

I believe expanding public transportation as a large-scale public works program is not only important from a social justice and environmental justice perspective, but will also solve a lot of practical problems the city currently faces. As population density increases in Seattle and more housing units are built, expanding mass transit to meet commuter needs will be the only viable and sustainable alternative to more cars on the streets or building more parking spaces when space is rapidly running out. It will alleviate the traffic crisis that Seattle faces, this crisis being one of the worst in the nation. Transit will greatly benefit working-class families, the disabled, local businesses, tourism, and connect people living in suburbs to downtown areas. South Seattle also currently has the often-ignored problem of contaminated air, another issue that will be addressed through more buses, trains, railways, and bikeways. Increasing the efficiency and coverage of mass transit will shift the debate away from what we need to sacrifice in order to build more parking lots. We could be discussing instead where to build new housing units (and retrofit the old), parks, community gardens, and other public spaces.

To move forward, the city should conduct independent studies of which building typologies are the most environmentally and socially beneficial, instead of basing such decisions off of biased recommendations from real estate developers and contractors.

5. *Affordability: In which neighborhoods and what mix should affordability be found? Please also discuss strategies you believe are effective at reaching affordability targets, and those you believe are ineffective. Please cite specific examples from other cities. Example strategies include:*

- *Preservation of older housing and retail, and other means to prevent displacement;*
- *Increased housing supply and microhousing;*
- *Incentive zoning;*
- *Seattle Housing Levy—please also discuss any specific changes to the program or amount that you'd favor when the Housing Levy is brought up for renewal in 2016; and*
- *Multi-Family Tax Exemption.*

Affordability should be found in all Seattle neighborhoods. To preserve some neighborhoods for the wealthy is inviting the city to deprioritize and defund neighborhoods where the greatest needs exist, in order to make even more pristine the neighborhoods where the rich reside. This will also deepen the process of gentrification and marginalization already taking place, and destabilize our communities. Studies show that violent crime rates, drug abuse, and other social ills are correlated with inequality, not necessarily poverty.

I support preserving and renovating older housing and retail to prevent displacement, and also because research indicates that retrofitting old infrastructure can sometimes be more environmentally sustainable than building new infrastructure.

We must control rents and raise wages in order to put families in the vacant homes and apartments that already exist in Seattle. After that, we can increase the housing supply, ensuring that it is spread throughout the city, high in quality, eco-friendly, and subsidized for low-income people. However, microhousing is not the final answer. Microhousing is immune from the neighborhood review processes that other housing typologies must follow, increases population density, has improper parking spaces which increases the amount of cars parked on the streets, and tenants end up paying more per square foot to live in what virtually amounts to a closet space. The main argument for microhousing is that it provides affordable housing, when really we should be talking about making housing affordable by capping rents, raising wages, subsidizing the costs for low-income people, and building housing as public projects. People should be able to afford housing that is safe and spacious enough to meet their needs.

I am in favor of incentive zoning, but it needs to go a lot further than the ordinance that we currently have. More bonus density should be set aside as affordable, environmentally and socially responsible construction standards should be written into the ordinance, and there should be target hirings of low-income residents.

Even with its shortcomings, I support the Seattle Housing Levy in its attempt to provide more affordable housing for people with low income. However, I would advocate that all taxation to fund the levy be progressive, in that the rich should pay a higher proportion of their income and wealth than those in lower income brackets. For similar reasons, I support the spirit of the Multi-Family Tax Exemption, but think that shortcomings lie in its focus on giving builders tax breaks as a solution to unaffordable housing. There are more effective solutions like enacting rent control or implementing a city public works project to build affordable housing, which will break our dependency on private contractors and won't sap the public coffers of tax money to fund other projects.