

40th Legislative District Positions 1 and 2: General Election, Nov. 3, 2020

Candidates for 40th Legislative District Representative were invited by *Salish Current* to answer questions on ten topics: coronavirus, state budget, local economy, policing, climate, education, health care, housing, transportation and border closure.

Rep. Debra Lekanoff (D-Bow) is running unopposed for re-election to Position 1 and chose not to submit responses to the questionnaire.

Russ Dzialo (R-Bellingham), candidate for Position 2, chose not to submit responses to the questionnaire.



Rep. Alex Ramel (D-Bellingham) is a candidate for re-election to Position 2; his responses are found below.

Coronavirus. *In the future would you advocate more than voluntary stay-at-home, masking and social distancing directives to contain the coronavirus pandemic?*

Ramel: I'm committed to following the science to make sure that we protect public health and save lives. The evidence is pretty strong that a combination of masking, social distancing and robust testing and contact tracing can contain the spread of the virus. Most of those measures are voluntary right now, and the measures that are mandatory have not been strictly enforced. I think that's the right balance. Most people want to do the right thing to protect themselves and other people.

State budget. *When you work to balance the budget, what would you specifically cut? What would you save? How would you raise revenue?*

Ramel: I strongly support revisions to make our tax system more fair. I would vote "yes" tomorrow on a capital gains tax on earnings over \$100K. If someone is earning \$100K/year on stocks and bonds or real estate — excluding their primary home and their retirement savings — I think it's OK to ask them to do more to help keep the schools and other essential services operating.

But that alone doesn't solve the budget crisis or the inequity in our tax code. We should be looking at other options for progressive revenue, and all the options are on the table for me right now. I think we

probably need a smart package that keeps our budget stable, that reduces taxes that don't work well like sales tax and B&O, and (that) couples that with taxing things we don't want, like pollution.

Local economy. *If you think your district's economy should be more diversified, what specifically will you do to make that happen?*

Ramel: My approach to economic development is more what you might think of as gardening rather than big game hunting: tending to many small businesses rather than looking for one big prize. Our first focus should be on businesses that are already here — where owners are invested in our community, their kids are in our schools and their social networks are here — and work to make those businesses thrive. Too often economic development means trying to cut taxes or reduce local health and safety or labor regulations to try to attract a big corporation. I think that's a race to the bottom.

We should be making our downtowns energized and thriving places, interconnecting our rural economies and growing value added processing, and protect the things that make this a place where successful business owners who have choices want to live.

Police. *If you think police reform is necessary to prevent discrimination against people of color, what specifically will you do to improve policing and police accountability?*

Ramel: We absolutely must address systemic racism in policing. This won't be a single bill or a quick fix solution.

We need truly independent investigation and a special prosecution system for cases involving police misuse of force. I want to make sure that if an officer acted wrongly, that they are held to account. But I also want to know that if an innocent officer is accused, that we have a system that the community will trust when they are found innocent.

We need to revise both our use-of-force policies and our training for officers. Chokeholds, tear gas, rubber bullets all have too much potential to be misused.

And we need to be thinking about what situations really warrant police response. Responding to a non-violent situation, like homelessness or a mental health crisis, with police who are not trained for those situations, can make them worse. Instead, let's prioritize getting people the help they need with trained counselors and behavioral health professionals.

There is more to do, and I want to keep listening to people of color and marginalized communities, and also to be guided by data about what is working elsewhere.

Climate. *If you agree that forest fires, extreme weather and changing ocean conditions are caused by changing climate, what will you specifically do to address climate change?*

Ramel: I currently represent the House Democrats on the 2021 Energy Strategy Task Force. We have set aggressive goals to reduce the pollution that causes climate change, goals that will meet our responsibilities under international agreements, the best guidance we have from science, and — most importantly — will meet our responsibility to future generations.

The strategy is a way to evaluate the various sectors — electricity, buildings and transportation, and think about them comprehensively. The good news is that we have all the technology we need to run on clean energy, we know how to do it and the transition will create tens of thousands of jobs. We can do this in a way that reduces historic inequities and protects workers. All we need is the political will

I have a few near-term priorities. We need a price on carbon pollution. We should pass a low-carbon-fuel standard. We need to fully implement the Clean Energy Transformation Act to deploy renewable electricity like wind and solar, as well as energy storage and efficiency. And as the electric supply gets cleaner and cleaner, we should be transitioning to electric cars and all-electric, zero-carbon buildings.

Education. *What will you specifically do to ensure that every K-12 student has a computer and high-speed internet to attend remote schooling?*

Ramel: In the 21st century, and especially in this pandemic, electronic interconnectedness is no longer a luxury, it's a basic necessity. I anticipate that we will be making significant investments this year in expanding our state's broadband access, and I'll fully support those investments from the capital budget. It's also important that we empower our local partners — cities, Public Utility Districts and Port Authorities to be part of this. These partners have access to finance, local area knowledge and project development know-how that can help us build a modern fiber system for Washington.

With regard to personal computers, I agree that this is essential to education. It was before the pandemic and they are even more important now. Many district are already able to afford to provide students with these resources. I don't know the best way to make it equitable for those districts that haven't made that investment, but I agree it's a priority for our budget.

Health care. *What will you do to improve access to affordable health care in the state and in your district?*

Ramel: Several years ago, Washington state created a public option for our health insurance system. This is a critically important step to improving access to healthcare, but it's not yet open to everyone who lives in Washington. A bill ran last year that would have made that option available to undocumented people in Washington, and I absolutely think that is the right thing to do. I'm one who believes that healthcare is a basic human right, but even if you don't agree, I hope you have seen this pandemic reveal the ways in which we are connected to each other.

Housing. *What will you do to improve access to affordable housing in the state and in your district?*

Ramel: The top priority here is the state's Housing Trust Fund, which we use to support construction of housing. I'm an advocate for increasing the annual funding levels for housing within the capital budget, and I'm focused on ensuring that these homes stay affordable permanently.

We also voted this year to give local governments the authority to create local revenue for housing. These kinds of local funds will make our cities and counties more effective and invested partners in housing, and will help stretch those housing trust fund dollars further.

I introduced a bill this year that would have dramatically improved the state's multi-family tax credit system, increasing affordability, making the program work for more cities and work for more

builders. This bill didn't pass, but I was meeting with stakeholders earlier today, we're going to bring the idea back next year and pass it. It's too important not to.

Transportation. *How will you pay for our state transportation needs, including ferry service?*

Ramel: Our transportation budget has been hit really hard by Tim Eyman's initiative — billions of dollars in shortfalls over the next few years. Without a new revenue alternative, we will have a real challenge maintaining our basic highway system and ferry service. This comes at a time when we need to be building and replacing ferries continuously for the next decade in order to catch our aging fleet up and maintain the service of the system and when we should be investing in transit and bike and pedestrian alternatives.

I'm also an advocate for putting a price on carbon pollution. The revenue from such a carbon tax could absolutely be invested in things like transit that reduces emissions, and can be invested in electrifying our ferry fleet as well. But to get to the rest of the needed work, we will need a new transportation funding package which will likely need to go to the voters.

Border. *What conditions do you think need to be met for the border between Washington and British Columbia to be reopened?*

Ramel: I think that's a question for the government of British Columbia. It's really unfortunate that the lack of a national response to this pandemic has put us in a situation where the government in Canada is unwilling to trust the quality of our public health in the United States. We have to rebuild that trust, and the only way to do that is with a coordinated public health response that reduces the transmission rate of COVID.