

## San Juan County Council Residency District 2 (Nonpartisan) General Election: Nov. 3, 2020

Candidates for District Residency Position 2 were invited by *Salish Current* to answer questions on eight topics: coronavirus, county budget, the ferry system, housing, health care, climate, the economy and vacation rentals.



**Cindy Wolf** (Eastsound) is campaigning for the District 2 seat.



**Rick Hughes** (Eastsound) is running for re-election as District 2 commissioner.

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

**Wolf:** I advocate following the advice of our public health experts. Washington currently has masking and social-distancing laws in place by order of the governor based on recommendations from the state board of health. Should those statewide orders be lifted, I would rely on the county's public health officer and board of health to analyze the local situation and determine what rules need to be put into place to keep our people safe.

**Hughes:** I've taken a hard stance on masks and social distancing since Day One of this pandemic. With a particularly high percentage of our population at high risk — and without the medical resources of other counties — we have to be very careful. This is why San Juan was one of the first counties in the US to impose a mask mandate ... and it worked. Even through a season that saw significant tourism and other transient traffic, we are considered the safest county in the state and one of the safest in the country. Between the mask mandate and consistent messaging about social distancing, we've been able to keep our numbers low and have allowed our residents to feel safe as they go about their days. I will 100% advocate the use of masks and social distancing until an effective vaccine is widely available and proving effective. In the meantime, if our numbers stay low, I will encourage us to cautiously move forward as our health officials see fit. We have followed the science since the beginning and will continue to do so.

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

**Wolf:** I would look at the essential services provided by the county. My priorities are the

**Hughes:** As most might anticipate, we're going to be looking at some seriously challenging budgets

health and safety of the people of San Juan County, restoring our local economy and protecting our environment. To that end, I will work to protect funding for public health programs, including nutritional health, mental health, domestic violence prevention, addiction prevention and drug treatment. We must fund affordable housing, rental assistance and emergency shelters. Those safety-net programs will be strained during a recession but funding them results in significant savings to our sheriff, courts and jail costs. Fortunately, there is REET money dedicated to mental health and affordable housing and this can often be used to leverage grant funding. The money budgeted for clean air, water and road safety emergencies will also need to be maintained. New construction projects and new roads that are not funded with earmarked money from other than county funds may need to be postponed. Climate change is not going to wait on the budget, so any money proposed for essential new equipment or capital projects will need to be vetted for moving us closer to the goal of being a fossil-fuel-free county.

***Ferries.** What, if anything, do you see as your role in ensuring adequate transportation service to and from the islands?*

**Wolf:** Because the current ferry system is state-run, good communication and advocacy and partnerships with public and private agencies are the clearest opportunities for a county official to improve ferry service. We can help by being strong advocates for electric ferries as improved battery technology becomes available. We should explore providing incentives, post-pandemic, for ride-sharing and/or a shared vehicle program for use by county residents attending to medical appointments or errands on the mainland. We could explore a partnership with the Port or City of Anacortes for electric-vehicle rentals, with charging stations on both sides of the water so tourists could potentially spend the night at an Anacortes hotel, hop a passenger ferry and rent an electric car on the islands.

over the next few sessions. This will not be Government Budgeting 101. This is going to be a doctorate-level course for governments everywhere, and it will require experience and creative, collaborative efforts to keep things running smoothly. Everyone will be making tough decisions on staffing levels, wage structures, community services and more.

As a county, we have already implemented an early retirement program, limited re-hires, frozen new hires and cut 5% of the budget across the board. We are currently discussing how we might further shrink the facility expenditures through widespread implementation of remote work. We are executing a furlough and wage freeze adjustment program for all management and non-represented staff, and working with local unions to match unionized staff on furlough and future wage adjustments.

**Hughes:** Advocating for adequate ferry service to and from our islands has proven to be one of my most important jobs as a San Juan County council member. I serve as the only elected official on the Washington State Ferry Advisory Committee and, as such, spend a good part of every winter in Olympia testifying in support of dedicated ferry funding. Many of us know the challenges of navigating the ferry system as locals or visitors. But after spending the past eight years fighting to maintain this basic right of adequate transportation for our residents, I've learned that the challenges don't stop at the ticket booth. I consider this position absolutely critical in its role of advocacy for our fleet and the residents it serves.

That said, living on an island, there is more than just the ferry system to deal with. I also work with the Farmhouse Gang (North Sound

Connecting Communities Program) to secure access to regional transportation options for the county, and have been working closely with neighboring counties to develop park-and-ride/busing options to provide our locals with better access to the mainland for appointments and shopping. This is particularly important for our elderly population who often can't drive themselves.

***Housing.*** *What specifically would you do to increase access to safe and affordable housing?*

**Wolf:** We have a critical need for more units of both low-income and middle-class housing for purchase and for rent. The people we depend on to provide essential services cannot find places to live. I would put much more energy into public-private collaborations to build more units. I would also do much more to get the proliferation of vacation rentals is under control. The council that approved the original vacation rentals regulations, of which my opponent was a member, essentially threw the doors open with little or no thought to the consequences. And he's done very little to make meaningful improvements.

Longer-term solutions will take a number of different forms, many of which will be unattainable in our current economy. But now is the time to plan and get our ducks in a row so we are ready to act when the money becomes available.

**Hughes:** The county has invested over \$2M for the support of construction of affordable housing and just approved another \$1.7 available in housing grants over the next two years. In addition to funding, the county should continue to work with local non-profits and land trusts to research specific challenges, develop appropriate solutions, secure public lands and ultimately build affordable housing for our residents in need. When discussing affordable housing in San Juan County one must also discuss vacation rentals. The county has committed to the most structured, rigid and strongly enforced measures ever to exist in the islands. As of September 2020, over \$100K in fines have been levied, 40+ unpermitted vacation rentals have been shut down and over 300 other properties are under review by our code enforcement officer. With another set of code revisions expected by the end of the year, the county is committed to limiting the impact vacation rentals may have on this issue.

***Health.*** *What specifically would you do to increase access to affordable health care?*

**Wolf:** I think the county council has a role to play in addressing these problems but not the primary role. We have a county board of health and we now have public hospital districts on the three main islands. Those are the bodies, working together, that are best equipped to take the lead. The council can and should facilitate and assist them in every way it can. One thing we can do is make sure caseworkers at the various community resource centers and senior centers have the time and training to assist people in the process

**Hughes:** Thirty percent of our population is over 65, which — combined with our remote location — makes for a whole different conversation when it comes to access to affordable health care. Considering the cost and time it takes to go off-island for treatment or an appointment with a specialist, transportation is one of the biggest hurdles to such care. I will continue my efforts to work with neighboring Skagit and Whatcom counties to connect San Juan via park-and-ride, VanPool and other communal transportation

of qualifying for Apple Health, Medicaid, VA programs, the ACOA and any other assistance they may qualify for. The council also needs to support efforts to create affordable assisted living that will enable seniors to remain close to family on the islands for as long as possible. The Green House Project is an example of the kinds of innovative approaches that might work well for San Juan County.

options for better access to all of our residents to the medical appointments they need off-island.

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

**Wolf:** We can support efforts (some of which are underway through the local “transition” groups) to build a diversified local alternative energy infrastructure. We can make it easier for tourists to rent an electric vehicle than to bring their own gas-powered vehicle. We can make it easier and cheaper to own an electric vehicle or low-emission hybrid on the islands than to keep burning fossil fuels. We can create incentives for consumption-reducing retrofits in our buildings and revised regulations in our building codes to foster energy efficient new buildings. We can make regulatory changes streamlining the permit process for owner-installed solar panels. We can direct decisions about county spending on roads, vehicles, building projects and more that take environmental impact and climate change resilience into consideration on a generational scale. This needs to happen with a full understanding of carbon footprint calculations, including how materials and labor are sourced.

**Hughes:** I am a strong supporter of environmental sustainability and advocate for green jobs. I have plans to install over one megawatt solar power, the largest network of solar panels on county buildings; will continue to roll out the conversion of the county to electric vehicles; and promote opportunities for park-and-ride as county employees travel from island to island. As the only elected official on the Ferry Advisory Committee, I will continue my years-long advocacy in Olympia to convert our fleet to 100% hybrid-electric boats. I will continue the arduous process of updating building code and zoning laws within the county to help preserve coastline and wildlife habitats. There’s not much I WON’T do in the name of addressing climate change. I think we must look at everything through the lens of how we might make a positive impact as time certainly feels like it’s running out.

***Economy.** If you think the county’s economy should be more diversified, what specifically will you do to make that happen?*

**Wolf:** We have an educated population, a need for tradespeople, a deadline to get off fossil fuels, a resurging agricultural community and many retirees hoping to age in place. Each of these presents an opportunity to diversify our economy and create jobs. Critical to supporting those jobs is ensuring that affordable housing is available, a problem I intend to focus on. How do we attract and retain the people to fill the jobs in those fields, to say nothing of our teachers, medical

**Hughes:** I have long been an advocate for encouraging diversification of our economy. I have actively worked for encouraging such change with my support of the work OPALCO/Rock Island and Orcas Online have done to make us one of the most connected counties in the country. The fiber to the home with LTE mesh overlay and high-speed fixed wireless radios have provided the infrastructure for a huge increase in our remote working population

service workers and law enforcement personnel, if they can't find an affordable place to live? The need for affordable housing itself presents job creation opportunities. We need to think much more creatively about public-private collaboration to create jobs in those fields. We have highly skilled younger people moving to the islands who telecommute and many others already living here who do the jobs that make day to day life in the islands possible. They are the people most likely to have the energy and ideas to start new businesses. I think the county should engage in conversations with them to hear their ideas about what our local economy should look like 5, 10 and 20 years from now.

in the past several years — and without them, the adjustments in the workforce over these past few months would not have been possible. This equates to many high-paying, low-impact jobs that are now flooding into our community. This type of work promotes diversification from tourism, encourages more year-round residents and increases stability in the local economy. Encouraging the community to shop locally will help to expand our small-scale manufacturing to create local brands of high-end, locally made products. I also feel it is incredibly important for us to invest in the trades. We must invest in the education advancement in the trades training to aid in the generational transfer of trade-related businesses.

***Vacation rentals.*** *Do you think vacation rentals are a community problem? If not, why not? If so, what would you do to address that problem?*

**Wolf:** A big part of the problem is vacation rental owners who view the islands as an investment opportunity rather than as a year-round community. It makes sense to me to let people who live in the county offer home-share vacation rentals at their address of residence or to offer a whole-house rental if they live elsewhere on the property. I think the proliferation of whole-house vacation rentals contributes to driving up real estate prices and driving the middle class out of the housing market. Permits for vacation rentals should be capped at the current number, be issued only to individuals, be renewed on an annual basis and expire when the house changes hands. Like a B&B or hotel, they should be subject to periodic inspections for health and safety and prove they are in compliance with neighborhood CC&Rs. They should also be subject to meaningful penalties that include revocation of permit for repeat or serious violations. Before a permit is issued, the existing number and density of vacation rentals in the neighborhood should also be considered.

**Hughes:** In the past few years, there has been a great deal of research, planning and enforcement carried out by our local government on the topic of vacation rentals and how they affect our housing market and economy. In the midst of it all, COVID-19 entered our lives and added an entirely new layer to things. Ultimately, we have committed to a strict charter of newly adopted codes wherein noncompliance can result in fines and/or the revocation of a permit. We have a dedicated officer who enforces these rules and seeks out nonpermitted rentals which are subsequently punished. We plan to adopt further changes to the code by the end of the year, put a cap on the total number of permits and implement an annual renewal fee to help track active rentals and hold them accountable to county standards.