

October 13, 2017, Candidate Forum - Port of Seattle Pos. 3

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Lisa K. Hutchinson

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>>KAREN: Thank you very much. We're on to Port Position No. 3, I believe. And I would like both of our candidates to -- you have one minute to introduce yourselves and, Stephanie, let's start with you.

>>STEPHANIE: Sounds good. Thank you so much for the opportunity to be here this afternoon. I'm Stephanie Bowman. I'm currently serving on the Port of Seattle Commission and running for reelection. I have been on the Port Commission for the last four years.

And about a year and a half ago I set a personal goal, and a goal for the organization, for Sea-Tac Airport to be the most accessible airport in the country for folks with disabilities. It's something that I care very deeply about. It is a social justice issue for me in terms of having fair access for all of our residents and all of our

passengers coming through Sea-Tac in particular and it's also borne out of some personal experience.

I have a close family member who passed away recently from complications with Parkinson's disease, and if you know that disease, there are many years leading up to that where my family member had accessibility issues, and so I really took it personally to think about what can we do at the Port of Seattle to make sure our facilities are open to everyone in the public.

>>KAREN: Thank you. Ahmed.

>>AHMED: Thank you so much for providing me this opportunity. My name is Ahmed Abdi. I was born in Somalia and I grew up in Kenya, in one of the biggest refugee camps after the Civil War of Somalia, that with the hope if someone comes here and makes -- works hard, they can easily achieve the American dream. But I know it's not true for everybody, especially those who live in around the port and have some specific struggles that they are going through.

I was lucky enough to work on Proposition 1 where I helped pass the \$15 minimum wage.

I'm currently working with the Seattle Housing Authority where I continue to advocate for people with -- from low income families, as well as seniors, and I have firsthand experience with it. I have family members. My grandfather, as well as my uncle, had disability and

through that I really came to know and learn what special needs that people need, and I'm passionate about protecting the interests of the people who are with a disability and making sure that their voice is heard as soon as I get to the chance.

>>KAREN: Thank you. So, for our first question: Under the Americans with Disabilities Act, the ADA, a person can be accompanied by a dog or a miniature pony as a service animal and must receive equal access. However, other laws, such as the Air Carrier Act and some local jurisdictions, define a service animal more broadly, allowing people who aren't capable of taking care of a dog or pony, or perhaps have religious restrictions, to utilize other trained animals, for example, a seizure-detecting cat.

How will you ensure that airport staff are aware of and respect the needs of neurodiverse individuals who may use other service animals to travel next year and in the years beyond?

Ahmed, would you like to start?

>>AHMED: I think it's really important for -- have everybody to have an equal representation when it comes to services that the port provides. Unfortunately, that has not been the case in the port the past years. Most -- there are many people who are

underrepresented when it comes to services and part of that is people with a disability.

I think when I get the opportunity to be the next port commissioner, I'll make sure that, you know, we provide trainings to all different parts, sectors, in the airport to know exactly what needs to be done in terms of facilitating and helping the people with the disability, and we will need to make sure that people are culturally competent as well as aware of the differences that we have in our community, and make sure that we address the needs for those that need us to address their issues.

I will be a champion. I have been a champion for working families and I will continue to do that. And currently as I work with the Seattle Housing Authority, that's one of my goals to make sure addressing opportunities for people with disabilities, and making sure that they get the priority that they need, and I will continue doing that.

>>STEPHANIE: Thank you. I think it's a fabulous question. And I would start with my goal, as I mentioned earlier, about making Sea-Tac in particular the most accessible airport in the country.

And that is in every single way. The only way that we're going to be able to do that is by making sure that our staff has awareness of these issues and we have a

culture change, that in every single aspect in operating our facilities, that we're thinking ahead about what is it like from the experience of somebody that has mobility challenges, that we're always thinking about what are their needs.

I would say that on our staff right now that we don't have that training and awareness and that's something that we can absolutely put into place.

We have lots of programs in place when we think about racial equity and those sorts of programs. We have not had that same level of awareness, I believe, for the disability community.

>>KAREN: Great. Thank you. So we have a very exciting event coming up soon. The U.S. Special Olympics are coming to Seattle in July, as you know. What are you planning to do to integrate logistically with neighboring cities to serve the 10,000 athletes and estimated 50,000 friends and families that will be coming to Seattle?

>>AHMED: Go ahead.

>>STEPHANIE: Sure. Happy to. I'm excited about the Special Olympics. I have been working on this for quite a while now, in particular on behalf of the airport and it was in fact -- I want to give Ms. Laws some credit here because she was the first one to make some of us aware of the opportunity, and it was, again, what really spurred

me to think when these athletes come in, what is their first experience going to be coming to Seattle.

Are they going to be able to get through the airport properly with all of their equipment and their needs?

So, working with the other cities, I think one of the things I'll just take for the port, for example, getting out of the airport, making sure, for example, that we have wheelchair-accessible vehicles easily accommodating those athletes, that we're making it easy for them to get to the venues. Raising awareness in the other cities that are participating.

I was fortunate several years ago to actually work on Seattle's bid for the Summer Olympics, so part of that you may be aware is the Paralympics, so I have quite a bit of experience on looking at those events and understanding the logistical needs for those athletes.

I think at the Port of Seattle we have a wonderful opportunity to open those facilities and think about how we can be completely accommodating and use this event to raise awareness throughout the entire Puget Sound region.

>>AHMED: I think the most important thing that I think that we need to do is to have policies that address specific issues and the needs that people with the disabilities have, and currently there's an issue with the

transportation, there's an issue with the parking, and also as well as housing and affordability. I think where we -- we as leaders, we need to step up in terms of, one, educating people about these fundamental rights that people need to have, and also as well, advocate for policies that -- policies in place and make sure it protects people from, you know, challenge.

I had the opportunity to work with different communities and, to tell you the truth, as a migrant, people with disabilities in the community currently experience a lot of difficulties in terms of language barriers, in terms of accessibility, whether it's airport or other services, they really have issues, and there's a need for us to step up and educate people, and even those who, you know, have those kind of struggle in terms of language. So I'll be -- I'll make sure I will be on the front line in advocacy as well as making sure that we address and we put in place specific policies that addresses and helps those issues.

>>KAREN: Thank you.

So, I know we've talked a lot about Sea-Tac becoming the most accessible airport in America. Can you describe some specific steps that are being taken or that you would encourage to be taken if you are a port commissioner?

>>STEPHANIE: May I start? Ahmed, you go ahead.

>>AHMED: Go ahead.

>>STEPHANIE: I have been working on this for a while, so there are so many things. I will start, I will give a couple of really specific examples. When you get off the airplane, making sure that the signage is visible to folks. That it is not -- that it's bright enough, that the letters are big enough, that it's at a height that people can see it.

When you look at our restrooms at Sea-Tac airport, making sure that the hooks on the bathroom doors are at a height that somebody that perhaps might be in a wheelchair can actually reach. And same thing obviously with our sinks and other facilities.

[Making] sure, again, as I mentioned earlier, that we have wheelchair accessible vehicles easily accessible at the airport, that you don't have to travel to the far end of the airport to get it. That there is good signage so you know where it is.

Those are just a few of the steps that we are looking at. But it really is. What I have asked for in this study, in order to make us the most accessible airport, is really taking a look from the viewpoint of somebody with mobility challenges. And every single step along the way, from the minute you get off the gate to the

minute you get out of the airport, and understanding their point of view and incorporating all of that into our plan.

>>AHMED: In terms of accessibility, I mean, my friend talked about, Stephanie, and I agree, but what I want to talk about differently is that the port is growing, the airport is growing bigger, but unfortunately, we don't have policies in place that actually protect this and helps minority, people with disabilities, their needs. And currently there's a plan to help draft priority hiring, and I think that the port needs to include specifically for people with disabilities to be part in that, in hiring priorities. I think not only making easier in terms of accessibility but also in terms of hiring and providing opportunities where they can have access as well as space to work. I think that's what my role would be in terms of moving forward.

>>KAREN: Thank you. Actually, so, our next question: Despite the Air Carrier Act protections for people with disabilities, airlines damage or destroy thousands of wheelchairs annually.

What can the port do to work with airlines that use Sea-Tac to address these ongoing problems? Let's let Ahmed go first.

>>AHMED: I think, you know, in -- in the last 10 years or more so, the airport -- the port and the port

leadership have failed in terms of addressing real issues, and, you know, this is why we need a new leadership in terms of making sure that it brings, you know, people with specific needs as well as, you know, people who are underrepresented to be at the table. And what currently the port does is it represents everybody according the way they want. It's not inclusive. The port is not designed to include the views and the values of the communities that are impacted by the port that live in and around the airport or even the seaport.

So I think my role will be making sure that the port actually works for us as a community. Right now the port is only working for big corporations and it's unfortunate to see that that is happening. That's why when Prop 1 was proposed and immediately the commissions were against it. Even after it was passed, they took it to Supreme Court. Unfortunately, that's what they did.

I think we need people who hold values deep into their heart to be the commissions, because every four years, you know, we need to have a way that we can have accountable leaders. And as moving forward, what I would make sure is that I would bring the port to the community, not the port looking for -- for people looking for the port. So that we can be able to address real issues. And we are smart people, we can bring solutions to problems

that we have, but unfortunately that was not the case when it comes to environment, when it comes to livable wage, when it comes to protection, when it comes to inclusiveness. Nothing has happened before.

>>STEPHANIE: Great. Thank you. That's a really important question. I want to address it directly because I can't imagine what it would be like to get off an airplane and have your wheelchair damaged and you're literally stuck at the airport without any way of having any mobility.

And so the first thing that the port can do is have a desk and somebody available to be able to deal with those issues for folks, regardless of the airplane that you are on. So I guess I would use as an analogy, if you have lost your bag, you go to your airline and fill out your little form. I think that the port can take it upon itself to actually have a help desk for anybody who has had those issues and make sure that as a landlord that our tenants, the airlines, have a fund available and can immediately help both refund but more importantly have another wheelchair available so those residents have mobility immediately.

>>KAREN: Thank you.

So, despite the work to make the inside of the airport the most accessible, the port's ground

transportation staff has made leaving the airport very difficult for special needs customers, especially those who use wheelchairs, even reversing policies, such as removing all the signage about the existence of wheelchair-accessible taxis, called WATs, and ending a project that would have -- or had been approved by commissioners for baggage claim pickup zones for WATs.

What should be done?

>>STEPHANIE: Thank you so much. This is an important issue and I want to give a lot of credit to Ms. Laws who has testified on behalf of the commission in terms of this issue at the airport.

I feel strongly, quite frankly, that we need a separate contract for wheelchair-accessible vehicles because they are the folks that are most adept at dealing with passengers with disabilities and making sure that, again, they have front and center access outside of the airport.

The signage issue is quite frankly unacceptable. It needs to be fixed. I have relayed that to the staff. It is the opposite of the direction that the commission gave, and me in particular, under the policy of making us the most accessible airport. We need to do more than just putting the signage back in place. We need to have better signage. It is still not up to this par that we need to

have it.

But having a separate contract and a separate area for WATs to be able to pick up passengers, again, that is very clearly accessible to everybody, is the direction that we need to go.

>>AHMED: I think accessibility is a huge problem currently that the port faces, the airport faces, and the port has not taken good leadership in addressing those accessibility properly, and I think we need to make sure that, you know, those needs are addressed and have a policy in place.

So unfortunately, what happens is that, as I said earlier, most of the time port makes decisions regardless of what the organizations like yours have an input on what is really needed to be done, and also, there is no piece that comes from these valuable organizations in terms of addressing it. There's no input that has been put on this. So I think we need to bring people together, especially the voice that we are missing, in order to address this issue. We don't just need to set policies without the inclusion of the values and the protections and the things that is needed from people with a disability.

I think that voice is missing. I think that needs to change. I'll be at the front line advocating for that and making sure we bring forward to that voice.

>>KAREN: Thank you. So, what are you going to do, if you become port commissioner, to improve the hiring of people with disabilities by the port and its contractors?

>>AHMED: Hiring?

>>KAREN: Hiring, yes.

>>AHMED: Okay. I think, as I said, the port currently is trying to find a way to adopt a priority hiring, which unfortunately, my friend, she hasn't committed to supporting that. For me, I will make sure that the priority hiring inclusively addresses the issue of the people with disabilities and we make that a priority in terms of moving forward and making sure that, you know, not only a few or one sect of our community is taken care of while the most that are needed, that are left behind. I think that's unacceptable. And I'll be the voice for making sure that change happens, what we need to happen.

>>STEPHANIE: I'll try to answer the specific question in terms of what was asked in terms of hiring at the port.

There are two things I believe need to happen. Number one, there is a thing called a disparity study that has been used as a vehicle to look at racial disparity in terms of contracting. Having a similar disparity study or an audit is another way to refer to it, of what is the

makeup of the port employees.

We have always focused on racial makeup, how many female employees we have. We never really look at how many disabled employees we have and what are we doing to increase those numbers to make sure our hiring policies and our population at the Port of Seattle is representative of our community overall. So, number one, I think doing an audit raises visibility and we can see by the numbers that we don't have that representation.

And number 2, for the commission, our role is to set policy, and we can set the specific policy to make sure that we have our port employees fully represented by the disabled community, so making that a priority amongst the hiring policies.

>>KAREN: Thank you. So we have one last question for you both. In our current state of emergency with Seattle's homelessness crisis, all hands are on deck. What are some ways that you can assist? You meaning the port, I assume. For example, partnering with city organizations to build tiny homes on Terminal 5.

>>STEPHANIE: Oh, I would be happy to start with this because I've actually -- this is something I'm very passionate about and I've done quite a bit of work on in the last year.

So you may have recently heard that the port

leased land about three weeks ago to the city to move Tent City 5 from its Interbay location where it was being -- it needed to end -- I won't say it was being evicted. The lease was ending.

The port is now providing that space for Tent City 5, a sanctioned encampment, to be on port property on 15th Avenue for the next two and a half years.

I led the effort for that, working with Sally Bagshaw on the City Council.

I'm proud of the stuff the port has taken to get involved trying to be a partner with other government agencies in solving homelessness.

Another thing we can do, however, is opening up our lobby as the city and county have done for many, many years to provide emergency winter shelter.

I have been pushing for this for the last couple of months and believe we have a great opportunity here now. We have nice weather today, but we know it's going to start raining again next week. This is another way the port can help.

As we're looking at all of our land we have available, we have an opportunity to be part of the solution, and I'm proud of the role that I have played over the last couple of months in moving the port in that direction.

>>AHMED: So, for example, I personally, I have the experience. I have been displaced. I was forced from my country to live in another country, in a refugee camp for over 19 years, and I know what it feels like to be homeless, someone that does not have a home that they can, you know -- that they can be proud of in terms of living. So having gone through that experience, and I am passionate about making sure that, you know, the homelessness issue is addressed and are met where it is possible to meet, regardless of whether we have -- whether we allow them to have the space that the port has or even -- you know, the port has a lot of money. I think even if it means investing some of the money that the port has, I think the port needs to take a leadership role in helping facilitate the homelessness that we have. That's one.

The other thing is we need to address the housing affordability crisis that we have in our city. I was part of a group the city brought together in figuring out how to adopt the fairness in housing and affordability in our city, and I learned a lot from that group, and I am also one of the Seattle Housing Authority's the way I continue advocating for addressing the homeless issues.

And, you know, as an experienced person and having gone through all this, I will make sure that we address those issues, and I will be on the front line in terms of

helping, however it takes me to do it. I appreciate it.

>>KAREN: Thank you, both, very much. We would like to give you one minute for a closing statement. Ahmed would you like to go first.

>>AHMED: I'm really honored to be here today with you and I'm happy that you provided me this opportunity to express how I feel about, you know, what it needs to be done in the next -- as we fight for the next port commission. I believe the port needs to have a strong leadership that has their heart and the value of our community. Currently we don't have none. That is for reality. The commission, especially my opponent, is there for big corporations. You can see that if you go to how many people that have donated, where those donations are coming from.

For me, I'm truly for the people, I'm an advocate, I'm a community leader, and I will make sure I address the issues that are really important to our community and make sure that those actually become part of the policies that we make. And I thank you and I hope we will do this together.

>>STEPHANIE: Thank you so much and thank you for hosting this forum. This is a critical opportunity for us to not just talk about our priorities, but hear your viewpoints, and that to me is probably the most important

thing, is making sure that we have those venues where we're hearing from all of our residents in King County, particularly those that don't feel like they have been represented over the long term.

So, I have been proud of my time on the Port Commission. I have, as I said earlier, this goal of making our airport accessible to everyone, because that's what we are. We are a gateway to the world and we need to make sure that our port is representative of everybody in our community and all of our facilities are open to everybody in our community.

I lead a positive campaign. I don't do negative campaigning and I don't talk poorly about my opponent, so I hope those of you that are watching tonight will look at my record. And I look forward to your support. Thank you so much.

>>KAREN: Thank you. A round of applause for both of our candidates. (Applause.) Thank you.

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