

Thurston County Commissioner Candidate Questionnaire

John Hutchings

DISCLAIMER: The following answers to these questions are my thoughts and opinions. I am not speaking for the Board of County Commissioners or Thurston County.

1. What skills and experience do you bring to this office?

I bring grace-under-fire. The ability to respond rather than react. Mediation, conflict resolution and the art of negotiation. I was the negotiator for two different unions, as well as the president and vice-president of those unions.

I earned a master's degree, in Organizational Leadership, Development and Human Resources. I am a researcher, being a Fulbright Fellow. Collaboration and coalition building are necessary when completing a multi-national research project on mental health.

Ethics and integrity are at the core of my being. In my heart, is service to others. I sit of the Board of Directors for Habitat for Humanity and have been on other boards over the years. This is the center of my professional and personal life.

Inclusion is vital to being successful. Including *all* voices and opinions from people of *all* ages is my way of doing business and is the way I do business. You will see after reading my answers, I am not about political rhetoric. You will see I am about action and putting into practice practical solutions. I say and do what I mean.

2. What is your vision for Thurston county?

A healthy and safe community for every citizen. Building on partnerships with the cities to continue to address the issue of homelessness, provide additional assistance to those suffering with mental illness and those battling addiction. Cleaner water and air (climate mitigation) are priorities.

Housing, food and other necessities must continue to be provided for to ensure an overall healthy Thurston County.

3. What do you consider to be the most pressing issues facing the county in the next few years? How would you address these issues?

At this very moment, it is the COVID-19 virus! Our public health is more important now than ever and there is no room for mistakes. People are

losing jobs, housing, health care, and families are being ravaged by this pandemic.

To provide relief is vital to our success! I was instrumental in placing a moratorium on evictions, no cutoff of utilities, providing tens of thousands of dollars to non-profits to deliver services to families and removing the courthouse ballot measure from consideration.

Over the next few years, recovering from the economic devastation and budget demands will be a major pressing issue. The county depends on property and sales tax revenue to sustain mandated services to the citizens. We will see a significant reduction in sales tax revenues for the next two quarters. If people lose their jobs and houses, there is a loss of property taxes. This will devastate the county budget. I will guard against any reduction-in-force or layoffs in the Fall.

The State continues to mandate the county perform services that do not come with additional funding. So, revenue and expenditures demand constant attention.

4. What are your county budget priorities?

A balanced budget is mandated by law. Working to that end is extremely challenging with costs increasing and revenues not keeping pace. I have been working to create, for the first time in decades, an emergency or reserve fund of about \$500,000. This is rapidly diminishing before it's been established, due to our COVID-19 response and associated relief. Law prohibits government from being profitable and places a limit on reserve funds.

The best practice is to maintain a balance enough to ensure a minimum of 3-6 months of government function should there be any type of emergency. Maintaining the continuity of government is paramount.

The public has been very vocal about their safety. The Sheriff's Office is 39th out of 39 counties in the state when it comes to numbers of Deputies. This is based on population, crime statistics, response time, safety of employees, public perception of safety and call volume. State law mandates law enforcement training, equipment, certification, hiring practices, etc. To hire 1 deputy costs about \$10,000, just to hire, equip and train before she/he hit the streets. Any other county employee hire is minimal in costs. Additional deputies are needed but we cannot afford them. Yet the public has been vocal wanting additional safety.

5. The rainy day fund has been greatly diminished. How would you go about addressing this?

We are creating our 2021-2022 biennium budget. As mentioned above, the reserve fund will be gone before we plug it into the budget. With the impending loss of sales tax revenue and property taxes possibly having an

extended due date, this puts pressure on the county budget.

Social services need to be maintained, supporting our non-profits will be stepped up and keeping our employees in the workforce is paramount. All very challenging, indeed.

6. What is your plan for the growing problem of homelessness in Thurston county?

Since taking office, I've been attempting to break the stigma of homelessness and mental illness. This is a major barrier and creates bias and prejudice.

The first thing I did, as Chair of the Board in 2019, was to join in with the cities in addressing this "regional" issue! We then hired a Homeless and Affordable Housing Coordinator, Keylee Marineau. She wrote a 5-year Housing Crisis Response Plan that cities are using as a template, so we are all working in unison, to address homelessness.

The County came to the table with a 2-acre site for homeless mitigation, \$200,000 for our first project with the Regional Housing Council. We became the fiduciary lead for the projects and offered our staff time to bring this along.

We are currently working on an Interlocal Agency Agreement, bringing all cities together in a responsible way to get people off the streets and into shelter, to transition them into housing, provide mental health and addiction support, job readiness, food, sanitation and other basic needs.

Directly due to this regional approach, Thurston County was awarded (within days of application) a \$1M dollar grant (just last week) from the Dept of Commerce, to assist us with emergency shelter beds and long-term shelter.

We are urging the Salvation Army to re-open their bed space to assist us with the COVID-19 crisis. Working with faith communities and other partners, we are bringing to bear the stewardship of the County to save lives.

7. What is your position on County policies where growth and the environment seem opposed?

There truly is a dynamic tension between growth and the environment. Government is mandated to deliver services to the citizens. The County is dependent on sales tax and property tax revenue to achieve our goals. Building our economic engine to foster additional revenue is far better than increasing tax rates. However, there is a balance between growth and our environment.

In attempt to keep Thurston a place where we want to live, work and play, and keep it a destination place takes concerted effort. I am working directly with US

Fish and Wildlife in creating the County's first Habitat Conservation Plan to protect the Mazama Pocket Gopher and other critically threatened species (frog, butterfly and bird). Setting aside acreage to achieve this will keep a large portion of our county pristine.

We have opened fish barriers in our culverts to the extent we have received local, state, national and international recognition for our efforts to protect salmon and other fish species.

We need economic development to continue to survive yet we need to balance it with sprawl.

Many come to Thurston County to visit our parks, trails, prairies and rivers to recreate. This, too, feeds our economic base. Nature does *not* need us, rather we *need* nature! It is up to your county leadership to protect it.

8. What is your position on the Rocky Prairie Development Logistics Center?

This answer will need to be vague because I'm wearing my legislative hat, deciding whether this project moves along in the request for zoning change. If I announce where I am on this topic, I do two things; open the county to liability and recuse myself from voting on the topic. That leaves it for two commissioners to decide the issue.

Though the project promises great wealth, jobs and growth (what I would expect to hear), I also realize once you pave something over, it's gone forever! I am a researcher and have been doing my job in digging deep into this topic and talking with many, many people. I have visited and walked the site with people on both sides of the issue. I've met with people living directly in the vicinity of this site. Very strong opinions have been delivered to me. I listen!

This topic comes back to the commission in a few weeks for further discussion and possibly a decision whether it continues in the process along with several other topics.

9. The County Commissioners sit as a quasi-judicial body. What background do you have you for making decisions of a legal nature?

Regarding land use issues, I consult with our legal counsel however, I question authority. An opinion is just that: an opinion. I am not afraid of challenging what I am told. I look for a decision that best suits individual rights and stretches the law where I can.

My background and education have prepared me to sit in the role of quasi-judicial decision-maker. In my 35-year career in law enforcement, I was

deciding such issues as: probable cause, reasonable suspicion and reasonable doubt. Whether to arrest someone, an involuntarily mental health detention or protective custody, the law is paramount. Knowing the RCWs, WAC rules, policies and procedures, I am very familiar with working with legal decisions.

As a union negotiator, grievance chair, president and vice-president, I advocated for members based on law, policy and contracts. Working closely with management and human resources (my degree) in resolving issues is second nature. Knowledge, experience and an understanding of employment law, employee rights and collective bargaining is vital. Protecting employees from the incorrect interpretation of law and policy many times demands advocacy. Often these are legal issues.

What is your position on the current system of cash bail?

I have had several discussions with the prosecuting attorney, director of public defense and presiding judges on this topic. The current system is biased and is full of inequalities. The 8th Amendment of the US Constitution guarantees the government cannot impose excessive bail. Excessive bail can be considered cruel and unusual punishment. This needs to be addressed should we move in that direction.

I believe we are heading in that direction nationally due to jail overcrowding, costs of incarceration, misuse of judicial discretion, etc. Once it is sorted out by the Supreme Court and Legislature, we can institute this practice. Only the most dangerous felon would be held without bail, theoretically.

A nice by-product would be the emptying of jails resulting in significant cost savings to be used for mental health community care centers, free clinics, homelessness, reserve funds, etc. We currently have only about 6-10 incarcerated juveniles in a facility with close to 85 beds sitting empty. We are looking into how to utilize this space for other use.

10. Did you support the proposal to move the county courthouse to downtown Olympia?

A month ago, I led a discussion on removing this issue from the April election. It was successful and was removed! However, it was a deeply controversial topic dividing the county and almost evenly split. A perfect issue for a ballot, letting the people exercise their constitutional right to tell the government what their desire is.

Yes, we need a new courthouse for all the practical reasons, but not now. We have people losing jobs, facing eviction and losing health insurance. Removing this from the ballot was the most compassionate thing to do.

I do not envision this topic coming up in the foreseeable future.

As for the downtown location: of the three sites up for discussion, the downtown site was the most practical from a study and the public comments received. It was to involve the partnership of Olympia. This would have consolidated 6 county buildings into one, Olympia Municipal Court would have been in the new building along with all the associated court support systems.

11. What are your thoughts on immigration and federal enforcement of deportation of undocumented immigrants within Thurston County?

Thurston County is a welcoming county. We value everyone regardless of citizen or immigration status. We did this by proclamation in my first month in office, 2017.

Our courts must be a safe place for everyone, free from fear of Federal arrest for immigration status. No Thurston County department applies for or accepts federal grants with strings attached forcing compliance with Federal enforcement laws. The courts and legislature have put into place guidelines for Safe Courts not allowing enforcement on or around courthouse property. The courts set the rules for their building and offices.

12. Mental health services are currently inadequate to address mental health issues in Thurston County. What do you recommend solving this problem?

I have been on this issue since 2001, when I created Crisis Intervention Training (CIT) for all law enforcement and other first responders. This is a 40-hour course that is still being taught throughout the country. I took this training to the United Kingdom in 2004 and it is still in practice. [The Thin Blue Lifeline \(2011\)](#), is a book I wrote addressing the need for police to understand what mental illness is and **divert** folks from jail and into the mental health system. If their crime was born out of mental illness and not from criminal intent, they should not go to jail; **divert** them from jail.

Being a certified CIT instructor, I was also in the inaugural class for CIT-Y. This is specialized training for assisting youth with mental illness. I testified during the last 2 legislative sessions on a bill sponsored by Sen. Randi Becker. This law, which passed this year, provides for immediate mental health consultation with a psychiatrist for youth in school, without parental consent. Our kids are only 30% of our population but 100% of our future. We don't get a second chance to raise them and they need all the help we can give, to ensure they thrive!!

Being the Chair of the Thurston/Mason County Behavior Health Administration (BHA), we are constantly working to deliver services to those clients in need. I have been instrumental in building 3 evaluation and treatment centers, in two counties. We are looking at expanding our local triage center to add 6-8 additional beds.

As Washington State quickly empties Western State Hospital of non-violent mentally ill, we are responding accordingly. There are not enough beds, clinicians, resources for these folks. This forces them to live on the streets and

under bridges.

I was on the Law & Justice Council 2012 – 2018, addressing this issue among several others. We have instituted a diversion program called LEAD; Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion. This is *pre-booking* diversion, used by law enforcement. In addition, being use recently is First Look. The prosecutor and defense councils examine an arrest report giving it a first look. From this discussion, a case can be immediately diverted to mental health court, drug court or other appropriate programs by-passing court and further incarceration. This is having wonderful initial results. We have seen a 5%-6% reduction in case filings.

Consistently, I have supported mental health court and our other therapeutic courts. I vote to fully fund them with our Treatment Sales Tax dollars. There are several other non-profits supporting the mentally ill. I was a member of NAMI, for several years and worked with them delivering training to first responders. I do not just talk a big game on this topic, I live it and do everything I can to break the stigma associated with mental illness.

13. Do support an initiative to provide public power to Thurston County?

This issue is becoming topical again. I am still getting up-to-speed on it. I've spoken to PSE recently and others. I am beginning my reading (research) to learn all I can about the pros/cons to make an educated decision should it come to the Commission. This would include a public comment phase before it is potentially put onto a ballot for the people.

This is one of the issues I need to remain vague on should it come to me in my legislative role. I am not allowed to tell people how they should vote on issues while as a Commissioner.

The candidate assumes full responsibility for all answers to this questionnaire. Your responses to this questionnaire should be considered public knowledge as we cannot assure confidentiality when making the questionnaire available to our membership.