

Egan Orion

City Council District 3

1. Looking at the current City Council, on what issues would you say it has been particularly effective and, in your opinion, where has it been less effective? Why?

In recent months, one of the Council's better moments was with the MHA Upzone legislation, which will create denser neighborhoods and more affordable housing at a time when both are desperately needed. Many have done a good job prioritizing constituent services, the notable exception the councilmember from District 3.

One clear place where they've done an insufficient job is in addressing the homelessness and affordability crisis. That, and the head tax, revealed how mired the current Council has been in ideology instead of solutions. The demonization of our large employers by some on Council has made it harder to use those businesses as a resource for finding and funding solutions.

2. More than 52,000 daily transit riders from across all seven City Council districts use Third Avenue daily to get to and from their jobs in downtown Seattle. While Third Avenue acts as a front door to our downtown, it's also the epicenter of the Seattle's largest outdoor drug market. A recent report commissioned by DSA and neighborhood district partners has outlined a large amount of criminal activity across the city, including property crime, assaults and robberies, is being perpetrated by a small number of prolific offenders who cycle through the criminal justice system. Have you read the report? If elected to the Seattle City Council, what policies might you pursue to curb property crime and address these issues in downtown in order to make our streets safer for all? How might you work with your elected colleagues to enact these policies?

The health and safety of all our neighbors must be the top priority of our City Council. We need a data driven, multi-faceted approach to effectively address this issue, but the traditional "lock them up" approach has proven too costly and ineffective in addressing crimes associated with addiction and mental health.

Most offenders are in and of jail on misdemeanor crimes and the nature of their crimes means they will spend little time in jail, and even if they did, the system isn't set up to help them rehabilitate. It would be more effective to invest more funds in LEAD, which incentivizes "familiar faces" in criminal justice to get into the system of social services rather than go to jail (or face more limited sentences by committing to work within the LEAD framework). This proven system, working with social workers, the police, prosecutors, and other service providers, provides a system with limited gaps and higher accountability. It takes time to work (on average 18 months to really make good traction), but it is effective.

Because incarceration doesn't benefit an offender with mental health services and medication-assisted treatment (something we need to implement if incarceration is going to reap real, long-term benefits), we need to be sure to have a path of providers waiting for people when they are released from prison. If there is any gap in support, those let out of prison/jail are much more likely to go back to their familiar lives on the streets and they will start the whole cycle over again, increasing petty crimes and burdening the system with people going through one, two, or six times. If we can limit the number of times people cycle through the system, the more the system will truly help people rehabilitate and at the same time cost taxpayers less.

LEAD works. It must be expanded to create an end-to-end system to stop misdemeanor crimes that impact our business committee and residents and provide real help for those experiencing homelessness, mental health crisis, addiction, or extreme poverty.

3. Homelessness continues to be the top issue facing Seattle, yet we have made little progress toward housing our homeless population. In your estimation, what is the City's role in addressing this crisis? Where would you spend your energy, leadership and resources to have the greatest Impact?

Seattle communities should be healthy, safe, and vibrant. Seattle has a core responsibility to shelter and house our unsheltered population. I would work on expanding the number of low-barrier 24/7 shelters available (and put them throughout the city); prioritize treatment on demand, using in part the additional funding coming from the state legislature for mental health and substance abuse; create incentives to bring back online apartments and hotels which have laid unoccupied for decades using Economic Opportunity Zone tax deferrals and other programs; implement a program similar to Atlanta's "Open Doors" so the city has market-rate apartments available immediately for low-income, temporarily homeless individuals and families; and explore any other possibilities that will expedite the availability of affordable housing.

With our expanded partnership with the county, I would also look into a large bond to fund more than 1000 supportive housing units for our chronically homeless, work to waive the permit fees for those new developments, and ask the state to waive sales tax. I think we have to look at every stage of the journey from the street to permanent housing and make sure we have a comprehensive data-driven model to inform our decisions. Let's make sure our funding is being used efficiently, defund programs that aren't working, and give programs that are working the support they need.

4. Seattle's lack of housing options that are affordable to our low and moderate income employees is an important issue for DSA and its members. In the wake of MHA passing at Council, what kinds of new policies would you pursue to help expand the availability of affordable housing in Seattle? How might current zoning fit into your thinking? Who would you imagine working with to enact these policies?

There will be more zoning changes in the coming years and with those in mind—especially in residential areas—we should make sure both townhouses and condos are included. The latter give people with disabilities and seniors who want to age in a place more options for housing. And condos are generally a more efficient use of space. We also need to build more duplexes, triplexes, and fourplexes, a key part of that “missing middle” in housing and a way to create denser neighborhoods while still largely preserving the nature of our single family home communities. Like during the HALA process, working with affordable housing organizations like Capitol Hill Housing and putting them at the same table with developers would be a good way to address the challenges of affordability from both sides and look for creative ways to get to more affordable housing by opening up the conversation.

5. Between 2010 to 2018, downtown Seattle added over 85,000 jobs. During this time, we have seen a major shift in how the majority of people get to and around downtown, with percentage of people driving alone to their jobs shrinking to roughly 25%. Still, as the regional transportation and economic hub, downtown street space is at a premium. What steps do we need to take over the next two-to-four years to ensure that people can access downtown and that our streets work well for all users?

Multi-modal transit, and more of it, is needed. The downtown streetcar is one piece of this, but we also need more frequent light rail trains during peak times and more connected bike lanes. The dedicated bus lines have improved the speed of buses through Downtown and having more express buses can make things easier for commuters and visitors to get around the Downtown corridor faster. Protected bike lanes, as part of an overall connected citywide system, will also allow for safe travel by bikes but also in new micro-mobility solutions coming online, including and especially e-scooters, which I’m a proponent of.

6. DSA currently manages and activates Westlake and Occidental Square Parks through an agreement with the City, which has allowed us to bring furniture, programming, staffing and security into these parks, as we work to make them welcoming for all. We also manage McGraw Square with some of the same types of activities. What is your view of this type of public/private partnership as the City contemplates major new public space opportunities along the waterfront and above Interstate-5?

Whenever we can activate public spaces, we make them safer and utilize those spaces to their maximum benefit. Whether through public/private partnership or through city employees serving as hosts in those parks, the public seeing these hubs of civic life as safe and inviting makes city living better for all of us.

7. Downtown Seattle is the economic center of the region, with large and small businesses employing more than 300,000 people. However, economic success for employers and employees are continuously strained by unpredictable and burdensome regulations and taxes being imposed at the city level. How will you work to ensure that there is more predictability and consideration for employers to support growth in jobs, retail, restaurants and investment in Downtown?

We need to do a better job connecting with all major stakeholders. We can't ensure everyone will come to the table, but we need to make sure everyone has a seat. Seattle can continue to be a great place for workers and businesses alike—there's no reason both can't thrive. This shouldn't be a zero sum game—Seattle can pursue policies that ensure our challenges are being addressed without making one side out to be a loser. I'll listen to the needs of new and existing businesses, work to address their needs, and will help create compromises that ultimately put us all ahead.

8. In 2015, a city report looked at Seattle's commercial development capacity and determined we could absorb another 115,000 jobs by 2035. Yet, in the last three years alone, we have added over 23,000 jobs, indicating that we are likely to surpass our growth targets much earlier than anticipated. Seattle has limited existing zoning capacity, and inadequate permitting systems in place to accommodate the future demand for commercial development. Where might you look to expand our city's capacity in this regard?

As a District 3 councilmember, I would advocate for a more distributed approach to building capacity. For example, on Capitol Hill we've had limited zoning options for office space in the Broadway corridor. Fortunately, the MHA Upzone legislation creates massive opportunity for us. I think by concentrating additional commercial growth around transit hubs would help to make all of our neighborhoods more prosperous. Additionally, I would take a look at existing zoning in places like Downtown and help streamline the impossibly opaque permitting systems to make sure they work efficiently so we can bring new development online faster.

9. As the City strives to allocate limited resources to manage and activate our complex urban environment, it has increasingly turned to Business Improvement Areas (BIAs) for support. These BIAs build community capacity and give agency and tools to local communities to address their own priorities. What is your view of these groups and their impact?

As a BIA director myself, I think establishing and growing BIAs is an incredibly effective way to make commercial zones work better, attract more customers, and stay vibrant. I have a lot of thoughts on this, but put simply, I think it's a fair and consistently-funded business district mechanism, and the city should do all it should to encourage and support the BIAs in the city.

10. Downtown is not only one of the fastest-growing residential neighborhood in the region, but also the jobs center of Seattle. If you are elected to serve on the City Council, how would you go about balancing the needs of your district with the City as a whole? What are the top issues facing your district and how do you see them intersecting with the issues at play in downtown? I think there are two key areas where the needs of my district and the needs of downtown align. One is an advocate for constituents with regards to increased regulation and taxation of businesses (small businesses in particular). Second, are the issues that arise from homelessness in our neighborhoods. How can we keep business prosperous and successful, while also helping those living in Seattle who are either without shelter or on the verge of homelessness? Crafting a solution to these issues, and striking a balance between the two, will be essential for the new council.