

**Clark County Board of Commissioners  
Commissioner Vacancy Questionnaire  
Submitted By: Craig Pridemore**

- **Park fees:**

Clark County used to charge parking fees at our regional parks and boat launches. We removed those fees and redefined the role of our parks staff from fee collectors confined to booths, to park ambassadors mixing with and helping our guests. Park staff is now giving service to those coming to the parks instead of taking money from them.

**Do you support those changes or should they be repealed?**

I think the policy is fine so long as it's sustainable. My recollection is that elimination of the program would cost the county general fund \$325,000 a year in revenue. A significant piece of that revenue was consumed by the staff actually collecting the fee. Had the county eliminated the fee and eliminated the associated costs, it would have had a neutral impact on the budget. If that staff is now engaged as "park ambassadors", revenue has been cut without a corresponding cut in expenditures. This is fine so long as economic growth in the county is at a pace that can continue to support the program. If the economy slows or when a recession hits (and it always will) the program is unlikely to be maintained against the press of other county priorities, most notably criminal and civil justice.

One of the primary arguments on behalf of the parks fees was that they had a strong, identifiable impact on vandalism and hooliganism in county parks. Having staff diverted to being "park ambassadors" may have a similar impact, but when it is no longer sustainable, any such benefits will be lost and there will be greater fiscal pressure to close or limit parks access, or to operate them in an unsafe manner, increasing the county's risk of lawsuit from injured patrons. It further makes it more difficult to provide for preservation of parks' capital assets that were paid for and are owned by the citizens of Clark County.

If accurate, opposition to parks fees does represent a significant shift in citizen desires from the past twenty-five years. While citizens have historically supported some percentage of socialized cost (where everyone contributes to a service without regard to direct or personal benefit), they have also historically called for user fees in which some portion of a service is based on how often you directly benefit from it. This program, the fee waiver program and opposition to tolls all suggest that the county now believes that socialized costs are best and that all taxpayers should pay equally for services regardless of whether or not they use it. I'm not sure that is the real desire of county citizens and it's a 100% socialized formula I'm not sure I'm altogether comfortable with. We all benefit from having high quality of life in

our community, but it's reasonable to believe that those who benefit most directly should pay a little more. I use county parks very frequently. I've never felt it unfair to expect me to kick in an extra \$3 for that greater use of the service.

- **Job Creator Fee Waivers:**

Since June 2013 the Board policy has been to waive all nonresidential fees in order to stimulate job growth by creating an environment that attracts new businesses to Clark County. To further ensure that these new businesses are successful, we streamlined the permitting process and rebuilt our permit center. Quarterly reports show that the revenue generated by the new businesses more than compensate for the waived fees. New construction is up and Clark County job growth is twice that of the rest of the state. To date, the financial impacts have been contained within the normal subsidy provided to the Building Fund.

**Do you support the Board's policy of waving fees for new businesses, or should the policy be repealed?**

I have no opinion at this time pending an independent analysis of the program's effectiveness. I am skeptical that it has had any impact other than shifting costs from private sector developers to taxpayers. The Columbia River Economic Development Council (CREDC) has long identified three primary barriers to economic development in the county: 1) the lack of large, flat, buildable lands, 2) the costs of complying with wetlands and storm water regulations, and 3) permit processing times. Eliminating developer fees has had no impact on any of those three primary barriers.

Anecdotally, it's not clear that recent economic activity in the county has been affected by the fee waivers. A majority of the jobs growth since inception of the waivers appears to be inside city limits and in a slow return of the county housing market. Neither of those types of activity were affected or promoted by the fee waiver. Lacking an independent economic impact study, it appears that the gradual economic recovery in Clark County is in line with the normal expansion of a growing community during a national economic recovery and cannot be attributed to the fee waivers or to actions taken by the county.

Finally, an analysis of the program needs to address the critical "But for..." question; specifically, "Would current developments have gone elsewhere, *but for* the fee waiver?" It is unlikely that the developers who benefited from the waiver can provide an accurate assessment of this. A professional, independent analysis, however, can consult with professionals of similar projects and assess whether or not the project would have happened without the waiver. In that case, the only practical effect of the program has been to "gift" taxpayers' money to private sector developers. As I say, I will wait for a professional independent analysis before I form my opinion, but I am skeptical of it.

If there has not been the level of economic impact envisioned, the fee waiver program has put greater strain on the near-term fiscal stability of the county and increases risks for its long-term fiscal stability. In the case of permitting fees where taxpayers are now paying the full cost of processing applications, the impact is shorter term and competes with other community interests including law enforcement and criminal justice. In the case of impact fees, a fee waiver will eventually require taxpayers to pick up the burden. This cannot be alleviated by future development which can only be held accountable for its own impacts. The county will need to prioritize new road construction over maintenance, begin using general fund revenues to subsidize the county road fund, or raise taxes.

Regardless of the results of the independent analysis, I do think the current board should be commended for trying something different. Too often politicians shy away from exploring new alternatives for fear of voter recrimination. If past efforts have failed (and most efforts to promote faster jobs growth in Clark County have – CREDC being a notable exception), why not think outside the box and at least try a new approach? I wish I could be more idealistic about the outcome of this particular program, but that doesn't mean it wasn't worth trying.

- **Toll-free East County Bridge:**

In our November 2013 General Election, voters instructed Clark County Commissioners to explore the option of an East County Bridge. In response to that vote, the Board unanimously agreed to champion the project by welcoming unsolicited proposals of a fully designed, ready to build bridge at no cost to the taxpayers and bring it back to the voters for a final county-wide advisory vote in November. The complete turnkey package guaranteed price will be in hand by August.

**Do you support the exploration of this project and the leadership role of the Board?**

Yes.

I am highly skeptical that such a project is feasible, but that's no reason not to explore the possibility and to begin the lengthy process of getting to construction. To provide "leadership" to the effort, however, the board must first develop partnerships with other community leaders if it is to be successful. Active support from the City of Vancouver and/or the City of Camas will be necessary. Support from the Washington State Department of Transportation, C-Tran and the Southwest Washington Regional Transportation Council will be critical. Equally critical will be coordination with and support from the Bi-State Transportation Committee, the State of Oregon, Metro Oregon, Tri-Met, the Joint Policy Advisory Committee for Transportation, and several cities and counties in the Metro region. Eventually, it will require the strong support of congressional delegations on both sides of the river, particularly US Senator Patty Murray. From the outside, it doesn't appear that the

board has developed any of those critical partnerships and is struggling to move a new process forward.

I believe I could be of assistance in that effort as I have long-standing cordial relationships with most of the officials involved on both sides of the river.

- **TriMet contract:**

The C-Tran Board voted to sign the TriMet contract that makes TriMet the sole authority over light rail in Clark County. It requires C-Tran to use eminent domain authority to meet TriMet's property demands and triggers a \$5 million liquidated damages claim if C-Tran does not fully submit to TriMet's requirements.

**As a county commissioner C-Tran Board member, do you support that dormant contract or would you vote to cancel it?**

I neither support the dormant contract nor would I vote to cancel it. I am convinced that light rail in Clark County is a moot issue and will not resurface in my lifetime. While cancelling the contract might serve to make a public statement, it will likely be interpreted very negatively by other regional jurisdictions that will be critical if an alternative bridge project is to be pursued, whether in the I-5 or I-205 corridor, or an eastside or westside alternative. I believe the damage of making the statement far exceeds any but the most political of interests. As a county commissioner and C-Tran board member, I would work to enhance our relationships with jurisdictions we will need to work with in the future, not damage them further.

- **CRC Light Rail Tolling Project:**

After spending \$200 million on the failed CRC project, and after the majority of citizens in a county-wide advisory vote opposes all light rail projects unless they first voted to approve it, would you still support bringing Portland light rail to Clark County unless the voters Clark County first approved it?

As I said above, I think it's a moot policy issue and only exists today as a political issue. Light rail is dead in Clark County for my lifetime and I'm highly skeptical that any official in Oregon will even engage with a Clark County official to discuss it. I know of no political leader in Clark County who will want to bother with it again. I certainly will not.

The future challenge for our community may well be to decide if we would be willing to discuss light rail if it is the only way to engage Oregon officials in discussions about a new bridge, wherever it is located. In 1999, they would not engage unless mass transit was part of the discussion and were adamantly opposed to ANY increased freeway capacity that didn't include a discussion about it. Myself, Commissioner Judie Stanton, Mayor Royce Pollard,

Port of Vancouver Commissioner Arch Miller, US Representative Brian Baird and others were able to secure widening of the I-5 bottleneck at Delta Park but only by accepting a dialogue about mass transit. Times change and it may be that Oregonians have developed greater alignment with the desires of Clark County commuters for increased freeway capacity but I do doubt that, and I doubt that will change in my lifetime. While I will support any effort to build a third bridge, I strongly believe it will require a willingness to discuss mass transit if it is to receive any kind of effective cooperation from Oregon, even if the project is wholly funded by people outside the region.

- **Bus Rapid Transit:**

Voters in a county-wide advisory vote opposed any Bus Rapid Transit project unless they first voted to approve it. Voters also opposed sales tax hike to fund Bus Rapid Transit in the November 2012 Proposition One General Election after C-Tran made a commitment not to spend voter approved taxes on BRT against the will of the voters.

**As a county commissioner C-Tran Board member, would you vote to build Bus Rapid Transit anyway or would you require voter approval as a condition of approval?**

My decision-making process about Bus Rapid Transit will be based on a fiscal analysis of the cost/benefits of such a project, not on ideological support for, or opposition to, a particular transportation modality. If the project pencils and can deliver more riders at less cost per passenger mile, it should be considered. If it does not, it should not be considered. Responsible fiscal decisions should not be subject to political manipulation or campaigns.

- **Property Tax increases:**

Clark County Commissioners have voiced their commitment to not raise property taxes and have voted not to raise them. The most current supplemental budget provided funding for 8 new sheriff deputies while adding \$1.2 million to our General Fund cash reserves. Staff has successfully realized cost savings while our local economy slowly but steadily increases revenues without raising tax rates.

**Do you also oppose raising property taxes or will we need to raise property taxes to make ends meet?**

I don't unilaterally make tax decisions as a political exercise. As a county commissioner, my responsibility will be to assess all the alternatives to taxes and, if necessary, support tax increases to provide core, mandated services; to maintain the fiscal stability of the county as an organization; and to preserve the safety and livability of the community. At present, the county is able to maintain fiscal stability without increasing taxes. It is, however, lowering service levels with little public understanding of the impacts.

While the current board has restored some deputies to the field that were cut during the recession, the Sheriff's Office remains at staffing levels for law enforcement that were in place in 2004. The county's population has continued to increase since then meaning that there is an increasing number of citizens that must be protected by a single deputy. Over the past thirty years, this has led to less attention being paid to low-level crimes, encouraging entry by new criminals. This leads to the risk of them advancing to more serious crimes and endangers the safety of officers when adequate backup is unavailable in critical instances. This situation will continue to erode in the future. We are fortunate that national crime trends have decreased in recent years owing in large part to the efforts of law enforcement. Hopefully, that trend remains comparatively low. Not providing adequate law enforcement, however, makes that less likely as new residents begin to believe that crime can pay. Even current staffing levels will be impossible to maintain when the next recession inevitably hits.

There are similar risks with deferred maintenance of county facilities including buildings, parks and roads. These capital assets can remain serviceable for many years without adequate preservation, but the price does inevitably become due and always becomes greater. The gradual wear and tear on those citizen-owned assets lowers their value and eventually requires a significant investment to restore or replace them.

It's easy to maintain fiscal stability in good times. The challenge is what to do it when times are not so good, whether through recessions or increased population demands on core government services. It's even more difficult in good times to lay a firm foundation for when difficult times come. It is the duty of elected officials to weigh those risks and, when necessary, fulfill their legal responsibility to the community. In some circumstances, fulfilling that responsibility may require raising taxes. It may not be necessary today, but it would be irresponsible and a repudiation of duty to say that it will never be necessary.

- **What is your position on the Coal Train?**

I have taken no position on the coal train.

- **What is your position on the oil terminal?**

I'm opposed to the oil terminal. It requires a great deal of acreage and provides relatively few jobs in exchange. Combined with the risks to the feasibility and profitability of the

Vancouver Waterfront Redevelopment Project, it provides comparatively little benefit to the community.

- **Do you have any specific recommendations concerning spending or revenue for the County?**

Not at the present time. I am concerned about the adequacy of support for our criminal justice system and about preservation of existing county capital assets including buildings, parks and roads. As mentioned above, crime has remained comparatively low so our current level of support may be adequate. I couldn't find information on the county's current level of effort for preserving capital assets on the internet but it is an area I will want to look further into when time is available.

The long-term impacts of Initiative 47 in 1997 that capped property tax increases to 1% unless a greater increase was approved by voters (an option no government in Clark County has ever attempted), placed county government on a permanent downward trend against inflation and against population growth. Without major and sustained economic development in the county, specifically high-value industrial and business development, county government will need to continually lower its levels of service in the future, particularly in areas like criminal justice that consume more than 70% of county resources.

While new residential development can provide temporary relief during its first two years when it stimulates greater sales tax growth from initial construction and purchases of durable goods to furnish it, it eventually requires higher demands on public services than it provides in revenue. The only way to keep up is to continually increase the rate of new residential development, an impossible economic formula.

The only viable fiscal strategy for Clark County government is major and sustained industrial and business development whether on lands under the direct oversight of county government or within any of its cities since those businesses also contribute to the county's general fund tax base.

- **From your perspective, what qualifications do you think are required to be a County Commissioner?**

First and foremost is an understanding of and compassion for the citizens you're elected to serve, and those who will follow them. If you are responsible, you don't limit that just to those who vote because many in our community don't and yet they have a huge impact on those who do. Children don't vote and yet have a major impact on our community. Ignoring the economically disadvantaged, the mentally ill and the chemically dependent comes at tremendous potential costs to our community and yet few of them vote.



Second, it's extremely beneficial to have an understanding of the organizational structure, operational responsibilities, and legal requirements that government must abide by. There are experts who can be hired to provide that understanding but it is helpful to have enough knowledge to know 1) when your own knowledge is limited and you must actively solicit and abide by their advice, and 2) when their information or advice might be inaccurate. This understanding isn't limited to county government. It is equally important to understand all the jurisdictions that county commissioners serve on.

Third, it's extremely beneficial to have a fundamental understanding of public finance, especially risk management, cash management, debt financing, revenue forecasting, public budgeting and capital preservation funding. Again, you can hire experts to do that for you but without the personal, direct understanding, you are likely to become too dependent on them and end up unable to suggest alternative financial strategies.

- **Do you have any related government experience in policy or budgeting?**

With the exception of two years as firm administrator for a certified public accounting firm that specialized in audits of local governments, I have nothing but experience in public policy and budgeting. As department finance manager for the Clark County Department of Public Works from 1992-1998, I worked extensively with county policy and budgeting for programs encompassing roads, parks, wastewater treatment, drainage, water quality, development review, capital facility planning, fire prevention, animal control and code enforcement.

As a Clark County Commissioner from 1999-2004, I focused extensively on budget and finance issues, but also spent considerable time devoted to mental health and chemical dependency programs, criminal justice, youth programs, transportation and parks.

During those years, I of course served on and chaired many of the organizations that county commissioners serve on including C-Tran, the Southwest Washington Regional Transportation Council, the Southwest Washington Board of Health, the Southwest Washington Clean Air Agency, the Bi-State Transportation Committee, the Council for the Homeless, and many others.

As a Washington State Senator from 2005-2012, I served as Vice Chair of the Senate Ways & Means Committee, and served on the Governor's Council of Economic Advisors. I served on and chaired the Economic and Revenue Forecast Council and the Joint Legislative Audit Review Committee.

Most specific to county government, I served on the Senate Government Operations Committee for eight years and chaired it for two. This built on my previous experience in state, county and city government by directly exposing me to the myriad of special service districts the county deals with including port districts, drainage, cemetery, fire and wastewater districts.



During my time as a state senator, I also served as Interim Executive Director of Columbia River Mental Health Services on two occasions, once for six months and once for four. That exposed me very directly to mental health and chemical dependency issues and the manner in which those efforts are funded by both the state and county.

For the past fifteen months, I've served as Chief Financial Officer for the Washington State Department of Licensing with oversight of a \$302 million biennial budget and the processing of more than \$3 billion in annual tax revenues. In that capacity, I also serve on the Executive Leadership Team and participate actively in policy discussions about public safety and consumer protection.

For a more in-depth listing of my policy and budgeting experience, I would respectfully ask that you review my professional resume included herein.

- **Since you will be elected County wide, how will you balance the interests of the entire County with the interests of your district?**

I've never found the district distinction to be relevant at the county level. Fundamentally, you are elected county-wide and it's unwise to ever forget that. It was very relevant at the state level, but is not at the county.

- **Specific changes to move us forward:**

Please share the three most significant specific changes that Clark County Commissioners should make to change course for a brighter future. How would those changes affect our local cost of living?

First and foremost, Clark County must work respectfully and productively with other community leadership organizations including all seven of our cities, special service districts, and private service organizations. Clark County can do very little by itself. It requires effective partnerships with others who may not agree with the county's perspective or desires.

Second, Clark County must engage its employees in using all their professional talents to both advise elected officials and to provide first-rate service to our citizens. It serves no one if professional experts in their field feel they cannot provide advice on those subjects, or that their professional input must be skewed in support of any ideological interest.

Third, Clark County must assess the long-term fiscal sustainability of county government. The City of Detroit didn't go bankrupt overnight or even within the elected terms of their recent leaders. They went bankrupt bit by bit over a period of decades, frequently by decisions that seemed wise at the time, or by decisions made for political purposes rather

than sound, long-term financial judgment and planning. Commissioners aren't just responsible for getting through today or through their term in office. They must transmit to their successors a stable, efficient county government that will survive the long-term.

All three of those will significantly contribute to a brighter future for our community. None of them will affect our local cost of living.