

Community Police Commission Mayoral Nominee Confirmation Questions 2016

- 1) Community participation, vis-à-vis the Community Police Commission (CPC), was part of the Settlement Agreement with the Department of Justice (DOJ). It is described as a process by which community input can be integrated into the implementation of police reforms mandated by the DOJ Consent Decree. What steps do you plan to take to ensure that a diverse set of community voices continue to be meaningfully engaged in the context of CPC's work?**

I have followed the CPC's work since its creation and believe in its mission. The CPC should remain a permanent institution in Seattle after the district court concludes its role, and I would work to achieve that goal. If confirmed, I will reach out to current members to learn as much as possible from their collective experience and wisdom.

It is important for members to go into the community to elicit engagement, face-to-face, on a person-to-person basis. Each commissioner also has unique opportunities to reach out. I, for example, would ask my colleagues in the trial lawyers' association and on the board of the QLaw Foundation (which provides free legal services to members of the LGBTQ community) to provide relevant insights.

The CPC website is great. I think more can be done to update the "Perspectives on Reform" blog and to present information in a more user-friendly, easily digestible fashion. This is important because, in my view, the CPC not only provides valuable input on what police reforms should be, but it is the best way for the community to become informed about what police reforms are being considered.

- 2) Describe what you believe effective community engagement looks like.**

Effective community engagement is about results. Is the community mobilized to ensure that its different voices are heard when fashioning reforms? Do different segments of the community believe that their perspectives are being received and taken into account in enacting reform?

It is important for commissioners to personally make contact with members of the community, including community leaders and political leaders.

I am interested to learn how many people are accessing information on the CPC website; how many people are reading the CPC's written materials; how many people are showing up in court for hearings; and how many people submit comments and ideas to the CPC.

3) What area(s) in police reform do you see needs the most attention and why?

The accountability system needs to be trusted by the community. The public cannot be expected to trust a system that is confusing and opaque. Seattle should achieve an accountability system that is easy for the public to understand and that is seen as neutral, objective, independent, and transparent.

4) It has been said that there are negative perceptions of SPD in the community, especially within communities of color and other underrepresented communities (e.g., LGBTQ, gender non-conforming, etc.). What approach would you take to either agree or disagree with those sentiments?

I have heard it all. Some people have great trust in the SPD; some people do not.

My direct interactions with the SPD have all made positive impressions on me. On the other hand, I am aware of events that, in my own opinion, have harmed community trust. There are areas that need improvement. I personally feel that some of the negative perceptions have a basis in reality and unfortunately detract from excellent police work that also occurs in our community. Ultimately, it is not my role to tell a member of the community how to feel. My role is to listen, to try to be a voice for the community, and to try my best to help move things forward.

5) What direct experience and engagement do you have working with racial, ethnic, and other diverse communities across the City? Give an example of work you've done in diverse communities that you think is relevant to the work of a CPC commissioner.

I am privileged to serve as Vice President of the QLaw Foundation Board. The QLaw Foundation Board—which is different from the QLaw Association—provides free legal services to members of the LGBTQ community in Seattle. The QLaw Foundation also puts on educational events regarding the rights of LGBTQ persons.

In 2006, I left a financially lucrative and successful position with Perkins Coie to practice law on the side of persons who have been injured or wronged by others. I am now a trial lawyer (and partner) with Keller Rohrback, where we try to represent underrepresented communities as much as possible. For example, I have had several successful cases involving non-English-speaking policyholders whose insurers have acted in bad faith. Currently, I serve as counsel in a case challenging a blood plasma center's discriminatory business practices against transgender people.

As the Chair of the Washington State Association for Justice’s Insurance Section, I have tried to promote diversity. For example, I fought to include a discussion on the representation of transgender people on the agenda of the organization’s popular annual insurance CLE seminar.

6) Tell us about any legal training and/or public policy advocacy experience you have with *public safety* matters.

My legal training includes general courses such as constitutional law, criminal procedure, and torts.

After law school—and before clerking—I worked for a short time with a firm in Washington, where I contributed to an appeal challenging a death penalty sentence.

I clerked for Judge Carlos F. Lucero of the United States Court of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit, where I assisted Judge Lucero in a wide variety of criminal and civil matters—including a death-penalty case marred by juror bias against gay defendants.

My practice at Keller Rohrback includes negligence cases that promote public safety generally. Many of our representations have important public safety implications.

7) Tell us about what legal training and/or public policy advocacy experience you have with *police reform and/or accountability* matters.

I have followed the district court’s and the CPC’s work closely.

I have not appeared as counsel of record in any case involving allegations of police misconduct, but I have provided legal advice to individuals who believe they are the victims of such misconduct.

8) The CPC's charge is to represent a broad range of community perspectives and to engage communities directly, to get critical feedback, and to then recommend changes to SPD’s procedures, policies and practices. What areas of its mission do you see the CPC can improve on?

I am extremely hesitant to say that anything needs improvement because that would sound like criticism, which I do not intend. My belief is that all things can always be improved, and I will work hard with other commissioners to identify areas that require the most attention. As a trial lawyer with state and federal court experience—and as the author of a popular legal treatise—I would hope to lend my legal advocacy talents to the CPC in any way necessary.

9) What is your definition of “community” within the context of the CPC’s mission, purpose, and work?

The community is everyone: young, old, protesters, police, unions, homeless, political leaders, educators, disenfranchised people, people who live in Seattle, people who do not live in Seattle but work in Seattle, others. Everyone.

10) Tell us about how you work with people who may have differing ideological or philosophical opinions than you.

I do it all the time. The key is humility and mutual respect. One has to listen and be open to learning and sometimes changing one’s mind. It’s important to find areas of agreement and then build from there.

11) What constituency or constituencies do you see yourself representing as a CPC commissioner? What particular training, experience or background allows you to represent those interests effectively with respect to policing and public safety matters?

I see myself as part of several constituencies.

I am a parent. My daughter is about to turn two years old. Although I didn’t believe it before I had a child, it is true that becoming a parent tends to put things in a different perspective.

I am Latino. My parents immigrated from Mexico to South Texas in the 1960s. My first language was Spanish. Growing up, I worked in the farm fields after school. I went on to be my family’s first college graduate. Today, I make it a point to represent immigrants and, especially, non-English speakers in my legal practice.

I am gay. As mentioned, I serve on the QLaw Foundation Board. In the 2000s, I represented a gay Somali in a case to obtain asylum in the United States. While clerking, I assisted Judge Lucero in a case in which the prosecutor asked the jury to assess the death penalty because the defendant was an “avowed homosexual.” Judge Lucero wrote a groundbreaking dissent in that case.

I live on Capitol Hill, the location of some controversial police issues in the past.

I am an American. I believe in the rule of law, civil rights, and equality. As a nation, we have a long way to go in overcoming racism and segregation. I have been extremely impressed by the Black Lives Matter movement and have witnessed two demonstrations—one in New York City and one in Seattle—which I found emotionally powerful.

12) Why are you interested in serving as a CPC commissioner?

I am proud to live in Seattle. This is the place that has allowed me to build a career and a family. I want Seattle to be a model for the nation when it comes to civil rights and policing. I want the citizens of Seattle to have a system of police accountability that they actually understand and, more importantly, trust. I am excited at the possibility of building on the CPC's excellent work to date and hope that you give me the opportunity to do that.

Submitted by Isaac Ruiz
January 25, 2016