

## **Appointment Questions**

### **Interim Director Beto Yarce, Office of Economic Development**

#### **1. What drew you to this important role with the City of Seattle?**

I was drawn to this role because it allows me to bring together my lived experience, my professional background, and my commitment to public service in support of Seattle's economic future. As an immigrant, entrepreneur, and nonprofit leader, I've experienced firsthand the barriers that can stand in the way of opportunity, and that life experience equips me to do this work with empathy, urgency, and perspective.

OED is not new to me. As a small business owner, entrepreneur, and founder of Ventures, I have worked with the department for many years. This experience as a participant of the programs and a partner to the department gives me a unique understanding of how the department operates, how it has grown, and what opportunities are ahead for us.

What excites me most is the chance to deliver real results by uniting multiple partners around a shared goal. I've built a career bringing people together across sectors, aligning different perspectives, and turning collaboration into action. In this role, I want to continue doing that for Seattle's businesses and neighborhoods by strengthening partnerships, expanding access, and helping create a more inclusive economy for all.

#### **2. What is your long-term vision of strengthening Seattle's small**

**business ecosystem?** My long-term vision for strengthening Seattle's small business ecosystem is a city where opportunity is broad, inclusive, and sustainable. I envision a diverse, affordable, and equitable economy with a unified ecosystem that brings together innovation, thriving small businesses, vibrant neighborhoods, public safety, and basic needs support for our most vulnerable residents. To get there, we need to remove barriers that hold businesses back, invest in technical assistance, provide training, and offer ongoing support that helps businesses not just start, but stay and grow. We also need to be bold in creating programs that allow innovation, especially for entrepreneurs who are ready to build the next generation of businesses and neighborhood anchors. Small businesses are the backbone of Seattle's communities, and my goal is to create the conditions for

them to thrive in every part of the city. That means aligning public, private, and community partners around a shared strategy that expands opportunity, strengthens neighborhoods, and ensures economic growth and equity move forward together.

**3. What do you see as the biggest economic challenges facing Seattle? What are some of the unique opportunities Seattle has for economic growth?**

Seattle's biggest economic challenges are rapid growth, affordability, and public safety, along with the risk of depending too heavily on one industry, especially tech. Like many fast-growing cities, Seattle has to make sure that growth works for everyone and that people, small businesses, and neighborhoods are not priced out or left behind. We also need to keep strengthening the conditions that make the city safe, welcoming, and viable for business investment. At the same time, Seattle has unique opportunities for economic growth. Compared with regions like Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York City, Seattle is still relatively competitive on affordability, which gives us an advantage in attracting talent, entrepreneurs, and investment. We also have a strong foundation in key industries like clean energy, maritime, manufacturing, and AI, and those sectors create real opportunities to diversify the economy and support long-term resilience. My focus is on building on those strengths while making sure Seattle remains a place where innovation, thriving neighborhoods, and opportunity can grow together.

**4. What do you see as the biggest challenges facing the Office of Economic Development over the next four years and what is your approach to addressing those? What are some metrics you would use to evaluate OED's performance?**

One of the biggest challenges facing OED is our capacity to maintain focus on the City's role in navigating the economic challenges expressed here. To address this, we have to be proactive about how we build the larger systems and structures that can strengthen our economy. At the same time, we also have to stay responsive to emerging needs from businesses.

Part of what has enabled OED to make such an impact over the past several years has been our growth, so that we can have that necessary balance between helping businesses with acute needs while building our future economy. The City's budget challenges are a risk for the resources we have available to carry out that work. Over the next four years, I'm dedicated to working to grow our economy to hopefully ease those challenges.

Some of the metrics I would use include:

- Stability, retention, and growth of businesses, including BIPOC-owned, minority-owned, women-owned, and LGBTQ+-owned businesses
- Ease of permitting and at faster rates for businesses - making the regulatory journey for businesses predictable, affordable, and timely
- Increased business activity and vibrancy in our neighborhood business districts, including Downtown
- The performance outcomes of Business Improvement Areas and formation of BIAs
- Growth of our key industry sectors and the businesses that shape them – including the number of businesses, a productive industry environment, and job growth
- Attraction of businesses of all sizes to the City, restoring the reputation that Seattle is “open for business”
- Increased access and leverage of affordable capital for underrepresented small businesses to grow and thrive
- Growing City support for scaling small and mid-sized businesses

## **5. What role should the Office of Economic Development play in workforce development?**

We have both an internal and an external role in workforce development. First, I'm proud of OED's work to convene over eleven departments to align investments, priorities, and opportunities. When this work began in 2025, the city's workforce investments and programs weren't coordinating or connecting the people graduating from programs and trainings to the next step in their skills or career path within and around the City and region. We've gone from having \$15 million invested across the City, across more than 65 programs, to getting unified around three main pillars:

1. The City as a model employer
2. Data and impact
3. Strategic partnerships with entities like higher education, labor and industry, public workforce partners, and other municipal workforce systems.

Three of the most immediate opportunities that the City has are with youth, utilities, and clean energy talent development within the City and regional economy, and we've continued to convene a cross-department workforce group within the City to advance that work. This work is already seeing success. On Monday, the Mayor and I visited the Joint Training Facility used by SPU and SCL. Seattle is one of three cities selected for the 2026 NLC/AIR GROW Learning Lab, an eight-month effort to strengthen municipal hiring, retention, and workforce data systems. The Learning Lab work connects directly to SPU and SCL's workforce needs, particularly around utilities and clean energy roles essential for service reliability, climate goals, and electrification. OED is also an important voice for the City externally on workforce development. Our department has insight and understanding of opportunities for job growth, industry and employer needs, as well as the levers the City has. We serve on the Mayor's behalf on the Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County, the only organization authorized to receive federal workforce development funding for Seattle, to provide that perspective to the broader regional structure. .

We're seeing many of our regional public partners prioritize workforce strategies that closely align with evolving industry needs. The City needs to be on the frontlines of those conversations. We have a unique opportunity to align, blend, and strengthen funding opportunities, public investments, and community partnerships, while advancing local talent development.

## 6. **How will you ensure that Council priorities are delivered?**

I will ensure Council priorities are delivered by staying focused on collaboration, trust, and clear accountability. My working style is to bring people together across the Mayor's Office, Council, stakeholders, and community partners so we can align around shared goals and move from discussion to action.

I believe delivery starts with strong relationships and direct engagement. That means keeping communication open, building trust, and making sure partners know they are heard and included. It also means being disciplined about follow-through, clarifying responsibilities, and maintaining regular coordination so priorities do not stall between departments or institutions.

At the end of the day, my approach is to unify the partners around the work, remove barriers, and keep everyone moving in the same direction so Council priorities are not only supported, but actually delivered.

## **7. What does meaningful engagement with small businesses and labor partners look like to you?**

Meaningful engagement with small businesses and labor partners starts with recognizing that their interests are interconnected. What is good for business is good for workers, and what is good for workers strengthens businesses. That symbiotic relationship means we need sustainable, resilient, and profitable businesses that can provide good-paying jobs, benefits, and real opportunity. For me, meaningful engagement means listening early, being honest about challenges, and bringing both small businesses and labor partners into the conversation before decisions are finalized. It means building trust through consistent communication, shared problem-solving, and a commitment to practical outcomes that support competitiveness, workforce stability, and long-term growth.

## **8. How would you balance supporting downtown recovery while also investing in neighborhood business districts?**

To advance an inclusive and prosperous economy, we need to take an “all-of the above” approach. OED has actively worked for many years across Seattle to build a racially equitable and vibrant city with engaged neighborhood business districts that are centers of local commerce, community, and culture. I’ve had the opportunity to work with OED as a partner, in my former role, and have seen the impact of this work. We continue to invest deeply in this work, from business retention support, to working to reduce vacancies, to forming sustainable BIAs that empower communities to reinvest in their needs, and thriving neighborhood business districts are a core pillar of the Future of Seattle Economy framework that guides OED’s work. We truly appreciate the partners we have in the eleven BIAs and many neighborhood partners around the City to do this work.

At the same time, we need to have a healthy and thriving Downtown – which is itself a collection of neighborhood business districts including Belltown, Pioneer Square, and the Chinatown-International District. Downtown’s residential population is

growing, and over the next two decades, it is projected to become the City's largest housing center. It's also Seattle's largest job center, with more than 210,000 workers commuting in even after the pandemic, and is a significant center for small businesses, with 2/3 of the nearly 4,000 businesses located downtown having fewer than 10 employees. Downtown is everyone's neighborhood – people come from around the City to go to events, arts, culture, or nightlife; to visit restaurants and go shopping, and to go to public spaces including our beautiful waterfront. For all of these reasons, Downtown contributes significantly to Seattle's tax base – enabling us to make the investments we do in our neighborhood business districts around the City. With high vacancies Downtown, OED is continuing to encourage business retention and actively working to recruit businesses to locate here. We also see so much potential for Downtown to have more neighborhood amenities and to encourage more positive activity at night, attracting people of all ages as well as families.

I don't see Downtown recovery and strong neighborhood business districts as mutually exclusive – and my approach to economic development approach will seek to make sure we're advancing both.

## **9. What strategies would you use to address rising costs for starting and sustaining small businesses?**

Three of the biggest cost challenges that small businesses face are commercial affordability, access to capital, and the time and expertise required to navigate City processes.

For commercial affordability, I see an opportunity to advance strategies across the real estate continuum – from just getting into your first space, to upgrading your current space, to bringing more predictability to long-term ownership. The teams in OED have done an incredible job evolving programs at each of these points, and I'm excited to keep bringing energy to that work. There is also a lot of potential for policies that make things more predictable and transparent for commercial tenants so they can get a clearer picture of the costs of a particular location.

I'm very passionate about access to capital, which is critical for a business to grow. I want to continue strengthening the system of community lenders we have, and

explore ways that the City can partner with the private sector and philanthropy to broaden what is available. The high interest rates we've seen for the past few years are very hard for small businesses, and so my team is thinking about how that influences our strategies and approach.

Last but not least, we need to cut red tape for small businesses. Time is money for a small business, and so I'm very motivated to make it faster, simpler, and more affordable to get permits from the City. I'm looking forward to working with other departments to make these processes easier to work through.

## **10. How do you see the intersection between transportation policy and economic development? I need support**

Reliable transportation networks for people and goods are deeply connected to economic development.

Our maritime, manufacturing, transportation, and warehouse sector is a key part of our economy, supporting over 46,000 jobs. Those jobs rely on freight mobility that works – so that goods can go from truck, train, ship, or airplane to where they need to go. As we look to retain and grow jobs in our industrial sector, one of the areas where Seattle has a lot of potential, we need to make sure that our transportation policies keep goods moving efficiently through our city and the region.

We are also so fortunate to have a strong transit system here that is in the midst of an incredible regional expansion. With the new Cross-Lake Connection, on top of recently expanded light rail service to Lynnwood and Federal Way, Seattle is at the epicenter of our regional transit network, and that's great news as it is even easier for people to take transit here, whether for work or as local visitors.

As exciting as it is to have more transit – bus and light rail – on the way, the piece that's challenging is construction mitigation. This is an area where I hope to make some progress, because I know how tough the immediate impacts are for our city's small businesses. These businesses, many of which are part of a neighborhood's fabric, go through months or sometimes years of construction, and we need a more holistic and proactive approach as a City for how we support them through such a disruptive time.

## **11. How do you plan to partner with the Port of Seattle and their ‘Teal New Deal’ efforts?**

The Port of Seattle is essential to Seattle’s economic future. OED and the Port work closely on several economic issues, understanding that the health of the Port is reflected in the health of our economy, and vice versa.

The Port is a critical partner to OED in economic development and workforce development. We have both commissioned studies on economic development and an assessment of our business climate, and I am in conversations with the Port to align some of our efforts on overlapping short-, mid-, and long-term goals, some of which include the ‘Teal New Deal’ efforts. We share the perspective that Seattle’s strengths position us very well to be a leader in attracting clean energy and advanced manufacturing to our industrial lands. This isn’t just good for the green and blue economy. It’s also an exciting opportunity to grow family-wage, accessible jobs here in the City.

In conversations with our colleagues at the Port, we understand the “Teal New Deal” is still under development. One project that has moved forward is support the Maritime Innovation Center. The Port owns the newly restored Maritime Innovation Center at Fishermen’s Terminal, representing an investment of \$37 million. The 2026 City of Seattle budget includes a \$400,000 investment in Maritime Blue, still under negotiation by OED, to support the opening of the center.