

# Mayoral candidates split over style



Bruce Harrell

Mark Wright, moderator

Lorena Gonzalez

By Mahlon Meyer  
NORTHWEST ASIAN WEEKLY

Two candidates for mayor, each emphasizing an ability to lead a heavily-troubled city and police force out of

the pandemic, squared off last week by presenting policies that were, in many ways, similar but with communication styles that were stunningly different.

Bruce Harrell and Lorena Gonzalez, at a Rotary virtual luncheon on Oct. 13,

promised to create additional positions for officers within the police force that would focus on social needs. They also both called for more affordable housing to

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## Umair Shah fights personal and public health calamities

By Mahlon Meyer  
NORTHWEST ASIAN WEEKLY

Here is a man who has taken on the burdens of many. And despite the chaos around him manages to remain composed and on task. Umair Shah tells the story of his life despite repeated interruptions, and he models the kind of calm intensity that Washingtonians have become familiar with since he took over as secretary of the department of health in December 2020.

His mother had a stroke 30 years ago, which changed his life. He was on his way to law school, after having been inspired by a popular Hungarian philosophy professor at Vanderbilt University. He had dumped his original major of Molecular Biology, and while his friends were already getting responses to their applications to medical school, he was preparing for a life of legal or policy work.



Dr. Umair Shah, secretary of health

Courtesy of WA Department of Health

But he reversed course immediately. "My sister and I often talk about the fact that our parents absolutely took care of us when we had needs as kids, and we feel and felt very strongly that it was our responsibility to take care of them when

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## Conrad Lee vs. Dexter Borbe and the future of Bellevue



Dexter Borbe



Conrad Lee

By Mahlon Meyer  
NORTHWEST ASIAN WEEKLY

One has been in politics for 27 years and points to the growth of Bellevue as proof of his accomplishments. The other is a relative newcomer but describes a long career in business, which he says can transform into successful policies. Bellevue City Councilmember Conrad Lee and local business-owner Dexter Borbe are facing off for a seat in the Nov.

2 election for position 2 on the Bellevue City Council.

**CONRAD LEE**

"I came to this country and found freedom, and liberty and justice for all," said Conrad Lee. "That," he added, "is why I want to serve, and the best way to serve the community is through being a member of the Bellevue City Council,

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combat homelessness.

But while Harrell described himself as a “team player” and joked with the moderator and members of the public, Gonzalez said she had always been an advocate for the downtrodden facing oppression and challenged many of her questioners.

Indeed, during the 30 minutes given to each candidate to answer questions from a moderator and then from the media and the public, more than anything else, it seemed, it was their diverging styles of responding to their interlocutors that came through most forcefully.

And since both, in one way or another, emphasized the importance of their styles, how each one communicates may greatly impact how they govern.

When asked what they were most proud of, both started with similar answers. Harrell said he was the only person of color on the Seattle City Council in 2010.

“I was asked by many underrepresented groups to be their champion,” he said.

Gonzalez said she was the first Latina elected to a city-wide role in 2015.

“I worked on important policy issues, but there is so much more work needed,” she said.

Harrell mentioned several specific accomplishments, including a \$100 million rainy-day fund and policies he said forced employers to look at qualifications of job seekers rather than past criminal history.

Gonzalez was less specific, mentioning advocacy for working families, helping survivors of sexual assault and abuse, and work for police accountability and reform.

**Police reform**

On police reform, both seemed to offer similar policies. Harrell was more specific about changes he wanted to put in place, while Gonzalez said she would implement broader social reforms that would forestall crime.

Harrell navigated a fine line between calls for outright reform and numerous questions about ensuring Seattle is safe. At the core of his policies would be a commitment to public safety.

“I don’t subscribe to ‘defund the police,’” he said. Rather, he would make sure the police had the budget to increase the number of officers, from the current 900 to 1,300, and bring down the response time to 911 calls.

Harrell mentioned discussions he’s had with the NAACP about protecting all marginalized communities.

“But I don’t believe in biased policing or overuse of force.”

Instead, he would create a “new kind of officer” who would come from minority communities and would provide public services of the kind that often cause fatigue among the police.

“They don’t want to walk around with

a gun and a badge.” As a team player, Harrell said he would be able to “pull out informal leaders” from the ranks who would “build trust with the community.”

Asked about a police chief, he said he wants someone who is a “master communicator, is bold, and will change the culture.” He said former police chiefs from Seattle, as well as others from around the country, including those who may have been contacted by former chief Carmen Best, have already reached out. He said he was also looking at interim police chief Adrian Diaz to be the permanent chief.

Gonzalez, as president of the council, defended its funding of the police department. The city council had discussed cuts of 50%, but in the end, the cuts were only 17% of its budget, she said.

“The Seattle Police Department has been fully funded, they do have the resources to fill their staffing plan.” Gonzalez said she would provide social services early on to prevent eventual criminal activity, such as increased spending on education. But moderator and KING 5 anchor Mark Wright said every business he had talked to has had its tip jar stolen every day, and when the merchants called the police, they were told there were no officers available.

“How are we going to handle this in the transition?” he asked.

Gonzalez said, “The system that currently exists is designed to arrest people for that behavior and is very expensive and has not resulted in the outcomes we want.”

The solution she offered was to encourage businesses to invest in downtown, build the environment to attract more visitors, and create “community service officers,” somewhat like Harrell’s proposal.

“This will allow the Seattle Police Department to focus on more serious issues,” she said.

**Homelessness**

The candidates seemed further apart on homelessness.

Harrell responded to pointed questions by saying he did believe housing should come before treatment.

“Yes, don’t condition housing on whether they’ve remedied their addiction.”

Harrell said he supports the newly-created King County Regional Homelessness Authority, which consolidates funding and policies across Seattle and King County. He said he voted for it while Gonzalez did not.

“The city government will never have enough resources” to deal with homelessness on its own, he said.

In her opening remarks, Gonzalez said that “meaningful” progress for homelessness meant “exiting people who are stuck in the shelter system” and creating affordable housing.

But later, when asked about the city’s Navigation Team, she said it had failed. And she attributed that failure to what she said was an approach that led with law enforcement. The major problem, she said,

was lack of available shelters.

Her approach would involve pairing community engagement through social workers and homelessness workers with increasing shelter space.

“We have to identify the kinds of shelters that are needed. We need to rapidly scale up shelter space.”

**An attack ad**

Harrell strongly condemned a political ad aimed at him that a member of the media asked about.

In a TV commercial, according to the questioner, Harrell was portrayed as having accepted a large sum of money from a Trump supporter.

Harrell insisted he had never met the person and that the figure was only \$550—much less than what it was reputed to be. And he said the tactic showed the traits of the different campaigns.

“It’s offensive. I supported Biden. I canvassed for him. And to link me with the insurrection on January 6 is deplorable,” he said. “The truth will always prevail over falsehood. That’s one of my core beliefs.”

When Gonzalez was asked to condemn the “misleading ad,” she demurred.

She vaguely referred to thousands of workers who had chosen to oppose the “hundreds of thousands” of dollars Harrell received from big businesses.

It was not clear if she was referring to the funders of the attack ad.

**Communication styles**

Harrell described himself as a team builder. He repeatedly talked about building a new narrative that would empower the troubled police department, help homelessness, and empower conversation in almost every aspect of the city’s future.

At times, an offbeat sense of humor, or

modesty, showed through.

Asked about zoning in SODO, he told the moderator he understood only about 30% of the question.

“You’re going to have to dummy that down for me,” he said.

Gonzalez, in portraying herself as someone who holds the powerful accountable, sometimes challenged her questioners, which included members of the media and the public.

She turned questions back at those asking.

“I’m not going to apologize for being a staunch advocate for working families,” she said at one point, giving her history as the daughter of migrant farmers.

Later, when asked why the “new normal” was drug users shooting up near the Pike Place Market, she denied the question.

“It’s not the new normal,” she said, instead giving an explanation of systemic societal change.

Asked how she would make Seattle safe, Gonzalez responded, “What does safe mean?”

She then said that this would mean a city that “respects each other’s humanity,” and pledged to invest in children’s education and health care.

She staunchly defended her work as president of the city council. When asked about its apparent dysfunction, she first said Harrell had been on much longer, then blamed several factors. For one, she said the turnover in mayors had contributed to the council’s problems.

“Four mayors in six years created a lot of instability.” She also said the increasing demands of vulnerable groups in the city, the pandemic, and Black Lives Matter had rocked the council. ■

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