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From Redhawk to City Council: Joy Hollingsworth Takes Her Next Shot

Archer Hobson Fehlhaber and Sam Bunn

The political and economic turmoil of the past several years has left the city of Seattle with a multitude of problems, including crises in homelessness, mental health and public safety. These concerns will fall to new leadership; in Seattle City Council, Kshama Sawant of District 3 and Alex Pedersen of District 4 have announced they are not seeking reelection. A prospective candidate hoping to fill the District 3 slot is Joy Hollingsworth—a local businesswoman and former basketball coach at Seattle University. She is seeking public office in the city and the community in which she's spent nearly her entire life.



Joy Hollingsworth. / Image courtesy of Seattle University Athletics.

"I see City Council as a destination, not a stepping stone," Hollingsworth said. "I think that's what we've been missing."

If elected, Hollingsworth intends to take a holistic approach to address the Emerald City's issues. She recognizes these problems as interconnected, exacerbating and feeding from each other. She argues that her family history lends itself to the task; her grandmother, Dorothy Hollingsworth (1920-2022) was a social worker, activist and civil administrator, ultimately becoming the first Black woman to sit on a Washington State School Board.

"She always instilled in me the importance of hard work," Hollingsworth said. "Her spirit continues to live through us in the work we are doing."

Hard work will be demanded of Seattle's leaders in the years ahead, especially in working to resolve King County's surge in drug overdose deaths. Hollingsworth characterized the problem as a public health challenge.

“We have a health crisis,” Hollingsworth said. “It is fentanyl, opioids and meth; and it’s plugging our streets.”

While Hollingsworth admitted that there was no easy solution, she emphasized the role of community, noting the criminal justice system’s failure to deal with the issue by itself. She argues that her connections with locals give her a strong perspective on the severity of substance abuse in District 3.

“[Addiction] disconnects people from families, from functionality,” Hollingsworth said. “They’re in crisis mode on the street.”

Poverty and addiction are intertwined, and advocates argue that current drug policies often serve to drive deeper fissures in the socioeconomic web. Hollingsworth is in favor of a response that draws on public health, rather than relying on the criminal justice system.

“We’re not going to criminalize poverty,” Hollingsworth said. “The people that are experiencing homelessness and these disorders—they need treatment.”

As Hollingsworth alludes to, an issue that is important to Seattle voters is the rise of poverty and homelessness in urban centers. Hollingsworth emphasized the need for responses tailored to individual circumstances.

“People experiencing homelessness have different needs,” Hollingsworth said. “A single mom who’s living out of her car has different options [for housing or assistance] than someone experiencing a mental health crisis on their own. There’s different outlets, different providers, different people with that expertise.”

Hollingsworth plans to diversify the response by adding as many “on-ramps” as possible, to help with transitions out of homelessness. Her proposals include increasing access to affordable housing, providing wraparound programs to help people adjust and opening up preexisting government programs to include more citizens in their eligibility pools.

“We’re playing catch-up for the mistakes that we made a long time ago,” Hollingsworth said. “Not building housing, zoning laws, all of that. I would love for us to stop playing defense and get to half-court so we can start playing offense.”

While Hollingsworth has big plans for Seattle, she also wants to pursue local goals within her district. One such project is restoring the abandoned Seattle Vocational Institute [SVI] building.

“[SVI] used to be a place where you could learn trades, skills, anything,” Hollingsworth said. “That building has been sitting empty for years. It could be housing, it could be a community center, it could be a place for our youth.”

Despite these current troubles, Hollingsworth impresses the importance of keeping the city’s collective morale up.

“We need things to celebrate as we tackle these issues,” Hollingsworth said. “It starts with a change of tone—we need to start highlighting and celebrating some of the things that are happening.”

Hollingsworth has spent nearly her entire life in District 3, being born and raised in the Central District, starting her own business and coaching women’s basketball at Seattle U. She has fond memories of the university, particularly when she got to fill in for Rudy the Redhawk during an assembly.

“Seattle U is such a beautiful and special place,” Hollingsworth said. “Everyone is talking about University of Washington—that’s the state school. You are Seattle’s school!”

Joy Hollingsworth will be on the ballot in the November 2023 Election running for District 3 City Council.

