

Dear Director Guirsch and the Orting Senior Center Community,

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to address these critical issues. As a frontline behavioral health specialist and crisis resource coordinator, I do not just look at senior care through policy briefs, I see the systemic gaps daily in our streets, neighborhoods, and rural corridors.

While Orting's downtown core boasts excellent walkability, our regional systems are failing older adults the moment they step outside that main corridor. Below is my direct, experience-driven vision for how Pierce County must evolve to protect our seniors.

1. What do you see as the greatest challenges currently facing seniors in our county?

The greatest challenges are structural isolation, fixed-income vulnerability, and the rapid rise of unhoused seniors. While the main Orting corridor is friendly to seniors with its walkability and shopping, the outlying areas are effectively cut off. High traffic congestion, a total lack of rural public transit, and steep geography isolate our older adults from the vital social and resource hubs in South Hill and Bonney Lake.

2. How would you support efforts to improve food security and nutrition access for older adults?

Food security is fundamentally a matter of personal autonomy and smarter regional planning. Poor development choices across East Pierce have allowed massive housing developments to sprawl outward while traditional neighborhood corner stores have dwindled, creating artificial food deserts. While downtown Orting has grocery options, residents living outside the immediate core who face mobility challenges cannot simply walk the distance to get what they need.

To solve this, I advocate for county zoning reforms that encourage decentralized, micro-commercial spaces within neighborhoods so resources are physically closer to residents. Furthermore, we must aggressively protect our local farms, which serve as the primary lifelines and donors to our local food pantries. By defending our agricultural lands from overdevelopment and streamlining county distribution partnerships, we can ensure our safety net remains locally sustained and that seniors retain the independence to access fresh, nutritious food without facing systemic barriers.

3. What role do you believe county government should play in supporting senior centers and community-based aging services?

County government must actively bridge the funding disparity between urban and rural areas. While Tacoma and Lakewood have well-funded, accessible social programs for seniors experiencing behavioral health needs and physical disabilities, East Pierce is left with a significant gap. The county must use its behavioral health tax revenues to intentionally fund specialized, accessible programming right here at the Orting Senior Center, ensuring seniors with high-acuity needs aren't forced to travel miles for basic dignity and community.

4. How would you work to improve transportation options for seniors, particularly in rural communities?

We must stop relying on broken alternatives like dial-a-ride and sprinter van programs, which have fundamentally failed our community. Ever since East Pierce lost its fixed bus routes back in 2011, politicians have promised these on-demand vans as a substitute, but the reality on the ground is unacceptable. These services require rigid advance scheduling and operate like unpredictable ride-shares, making it nearly impossible for seniors to reliably plan for time-sensitive medical or social appointments due to unexpected detours. Worse yet, these programs have a known history of penalizing the very people they are meant to serve, banning seniors and mobility-challenged individuals who simply cannot make it to the door or down to the curb fast enough to meet a van.

When our local cities eventually voted to leave the transit district because their routes were gutted, the residents in our surrounding unincorporated areas never got to participate in those votes. They were completely left out of the conversation.

It has been a decade and a half since 2011, and it is time for the County Council to recognize that this is a critical, missing resource. I will fight to mandate a comprehensive county transit resource assessment for East Pierce. It is time to bring this issue back to the ballot and give our unincorporated community members the democratic voice and the reliable, scheduled, fixed-route transit options they have been denied for fifteen years.

5. What strategies would you support to help seniors age safely and independently in their homes? Independent aging requires resilient infrastructure. On top of protecting seniors from forced, budget-breaking utility extensions, the county must hold utility providers accountable for our regional grid structures. During major storms, weakened power grids, dropping internet, and failed cable access cut seniors off from emergency information, creating massive safety risks. I will push for strict infrastructure winterization and grid reinforcement mandates to keep rural homes safe and connected.

6. How would you advocate for affordable housing opportunities for older adults? Financial counseling does not solve a systemic crisis when a senior is already on a fixed income and the housing market explodes around them. When the valuation of local properties spikes due to high-end development, it drives up percentage-based property taxes, creating a massive financial surprise that fixed incomes cannot absorb. This directly causes the tragic trajectory I see in my crisis work, where seniors lose a partner, fall behind on upkeep and unpredicted tax bills, and end up evicted, exhausting their remaining funds in local hotels before being discovered unhoused in stairwells or on the street.

To stop this displacement before it begins, I advocate for new county clauses that protect seniors from spiking market prices, specifically a post-retirement pause on property tax increases so older adults can plan their futures with total certainty.

Furthermore, we must protect and diversify our actual housing stock. While Orting is primarily family homes, we must actively encourage our local customs of additional dwelling rentals (ADUs) and communal housing options that allow seniors to share costs and maintain community connection. We must fiercely protect existing lower-income housing options, such as mobile home parks, and incentivize smaller, efficient, cabin-style housing and "missing middle" models over large-scale, expensive subdivisions that price our vulnerable residents out of their own neighborhoods.

7. What steps would you take to improve access to healthcare and behavioral health services for seniors? We must take services out of distant hospitals and bring them directly to the people. I will advocate for mobile integrated health teams, combining nurse practitioners with behavioral health specialists, to run regular clinics out of rural community spaces.

Crucially, we must fund dedicated in-home care teams and direct outreach teams that can truly form meet our seniors exactly where they are, eliminating the physical and logistical barriers of leaving the home for basic medical wellness.

Additionally, I support establishing regionally spaced prompt care units across East Pierce. By providing local, accessible medical interventions closer to home, we can offer prompt early treatment for physical and mental health issues before they escalate into an emergency room visit or a housing crisis.

8. How would you support volunteerism, social connection programs, and efforts to reduce isolation among older adults?

Isolation is a root cause of behavioral health decline. I want to actively fund outreach initiatives that link the Orting Senior Center to the surrounding unincorporated areas. By creating county-supported community networks that bring isolated rural seniors into Orting for social calendar events, and supporting peer-to-peer volunteer check-ins, we can rebuild the natural support systems that keep people healthy and valued.

9. What is your position on county investments that directly benefit older adults, including meal programs, food pantries, senior activities, and accessibility improvements?

These investments are not optional; they are foundational public health necessities. Investing upfront in the meal programs, activities, and accessibility modifications is the most fiscally responsible choice the county can make. It prevents the systemic domino effect where isolation and resource lack turn into costly emergency responses, unhoused crises, and public strain.

10. If elected, how would you engage with senior citizens and organizations serving older adults to ensure their voices are represented in county decision-making?

I will bring the County Council to you. I will maintain a consistent, personal presence in the community as I am passionate about continueing my work service our people directly in our east peirce towns and surrounding rural community areas to hear your concerns firsthand. Furthermore, I will ensure that directors like Staci Guirsch and local senior advocates have a direct, uninhibited line to my office so that rural senior needs are never treated as an afterthought in Tacoma.

Sincerely,

Kenneth King
Candidate for Pierce County Council, District 1