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Mayor-elect Durkan's surprising choice for deputy mayor



Mayor-elect Jenny Durkan, right, and Shefali Ranganathan, a deputy mayor. (Steve Ringman / The Seattle Times)

Incoming Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkan said she'll set her own agenda for policy, including transportation. But her choice for deputy mayor, transit advocate Shefali Ranganathan, sends mixed signals. They should work together to improve transparency, accountability and traffic flow.

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Seattle and the Puget Sound region are looking forward to a fresh start at Seattle City Hall under incoming Mayor Jenny Durkan.

Durkan's savvy and deep civic resume should help the city get back on track after a tumultuous year.

So it was surprising that one of the first people Durkan hired to help lead the city, as deputy mayor, is an activist with no significant management experience.

Shefali Ranganathan, executive director of Seattle-based Transportation Choices Coalition, is an effective political organizer and policy influencer. TCC led campaigns, including Sound Transit 3, that garnered tens of billions of tax dollars for transit projects.

Yet Ranganathan's experience is in policy advocacy, not transportation management, operations or design. Her management experience is running a six-person political advocacy group for less than two years.

This is a concern, especially after seeing the effects of President Donald Trump making political cabinet appointments, instead of finding the most qualified and experienced candidates.

Durkan said Ranganathan is smart enough to work “across all of the agenda items,” not just transportation.

“For the same reason she was a force in transportation I want her to be a force in a lot of areas,” Durkan said.

Still, the choice sent multiple messages. It signaled to TCC’s backers — including organized labor and construction giants making billions on Sound Transit projects — that they’ve got an in with Durkan.

The message is less encouraging to those in Seattle and across the Puget Sound region suffering from miserable traffic and hoping for a new mayor to end the reign of ideological transportation planning, skewed by vested interests.

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Hiring Ranganathan further embeds TCC into the halls of government. In this regard, Durkan is following Gov. Jay Inslee, former Mayor Ed Murray and King County Executive Dow Constantine, all of whom filled prominent positions with current or former TCC staff.

This raises a question about the diversity of viewpoints bearing on transportation policy. Why are so many called from the same bench?

Durkan’s campaign materials hinted that she sympathizes with TCC’s vision promoting transit, walking and biking over driving. Even so, the move may surprise voters who chose Durkan over candidates known for such anti-car crusading, including primary challenger Jessyn Farrell, another former TCC director.

Ranganathan is one of two deputy mayors hired by Durkan, who takes office Nov. 28. The other, senior deputy Mike Fong, was Murray’s chief of staff until Constantine hired him as county chief operating officer in August. Earlier, Fong spent more than a decade on the Seattle City Council staff.

We’re still optimistic Durkan will be a great mayor and provide an effective counterbalance to a council increasingly beholden to special interests.

Reassuringly, Durkan on Friday said that she’ll make her own decisions about transportation: “This is going to be my agenda — no previous agendas.”

Despite questions about TCC’s transparency, Ranganathan could be a valuable addition if she helps Durkan provide more visibility and accountability around the effectiveness of transportation policies and spending.

It's past time for Seattle to provide unbiased assessments of how its street planning and spending are affecting congestion and mobility — for all 700,000 residents, including those who must drive for work or other reasons.

What's really working and what's not for everyone, in every neighborhood? What policies and approaches need to change?

Performance must be gauged primarily by how today's residents are affected and how long it takes them to get around, not by progress toward gauzy, aspirational goals and projections. Decisions must be driven by objective data, not lobbyists.

Ranganathan knows better than most who really benefits from the billions being spent in Seattle and regionally on transportation. Soon she'll be a public servant, so let's put her to work for everyone.

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