

District 1 Responses to OPALCO Questions

District 1 Candidates – 4 year term

- Christine Minney
- Ryan Palmateer

1. What is your vision for the future of energy for San Juan County as a whole?

Minney: In the not too distant future, I view our County as having increased local power generation so that we can be self-reliant when necessary and contribute our own green power to the renewable energy we already buy regionally. The work is to help make sure OPALCO has the infrastructure to accomplish that. We can also engage with builders, businesses, and property owners to improve energy efficiency while incorporating new technologies.

Palmateer: My vision for our energy future includes a strong foundation of long-term energy independence based on 100% renewable resources. To build this foundation, we must manage our energy demand through conservation efforts while simultaneously replacing fossil fuel and non-renewable sources of energy with renewable ones. Finding a balance between our demand for energy and our production of energy while maintaining the rural character of our communities and the natural environment will be critical to achieving this goal. We can begin this process right now by increasing the efficiencies of our buildings and heating systems, expanding access to electric transportation, and expanding implementation of rooftop solar energy on county buildings, local businesses, residences, and farms.

2. What are you, as a candidate, doing to educate yourself on the complexities and impacts of energy policies on the citizens of San Juan County?

Minney: I have recently reviewed OPALCO's long range plans, so that I can be effective on council when important issues arise, and I am ensuring I have access to expert opinion on specific technical areas. Because issues of renewable energy and resiliency are so important, as well as numerous public policies, social services, environmental concerns, public health, community planning, economic and land use challenges that I face immediately upon taking office, I am building contacts that are experts and providers in their fields to help me understand the multitude of specific governmental, technical and functional areas an elected Councilmember needs to know and understand. I have an individual among my campaign volunteers who specifically works on long term energy issues.

Palmateer: I have been directly involved in helping form energy policies and community outreach as Energy Program Manager over the past four years for the San Juan Islands Conservation District. In this role, I have helped establish and lead many community organizations focused on energy -- including the San Juan Islands Electric Vehicle Association, Transition San Juan, Transition Lopez and Transition Orcas, the Conservation District Energy Roundtable, and Green Home Tours -- and convened a committee to establish energy and transportation targets for the County Comprehensive Plan. These efforts amplify the voices of our residents and educate the public on matters of beneficial electrification. They provide information about and access to funding for energy retrofit and renewable energy projects in the county as well. I have also read and added information to OPALCO's integrated resource plan for 2020-2040.

3. The Comprehensive Plan Update (Section B, Element 2, Land Use) speaks to land use for alternative energy resources and identifies essential public facilities. Two questions: a) what makes an energy source "compatible with the natural environment" in your opinion; and b) how do you see energy generation and storage as part of essential public facilities?

Minney: a) Energy sources can be constantly replenishing themselves, like biomass and hydropower. They can also be part of the natural environment like wind, solar, and tidal. We need to have a mix of these sources – all compatible with the natural environment for their different seasonal availability. b) “Essential public facilities” are a part of state law that allows the County to exempt the facilities from other provisions of land use planning. This will mean supporting the designation of electrical generation and storage as “essential public facilities” so that OPALCO has real options for where to build them. When possible, EPFs shall comply with existing regulations and policies.

Palmateer: Compatibility with the natural environment really means two different things. One is aesthetic compatibility. That is, how does an energy source change the physical qualities of the environment. The other is the aesthetic and financial cost of the alteration. What are we giving up when we make this change? I have found that location of any potential energy production system is critical to its overall success. Essential to any such change is an understanding of the environmental impact of the construction and the consent of those impacted by its presence.

Local renewable energy generation and storage is part of emergency management infrastructure which is an essential public facility. In the event of a power loss from mainland sources, for example, a local power backup will be critical to providing essential communication and medical care (including 911 emergency service) and maintaining essential government services.

4. What is your position on siting of utility-scale solar installations for local renewable power in SJC? How about tidal generators?

Minney: The placement of renewable energy infrastructure must be evaluated as to what the benefits are in a specific location that achieve a sustainable, affordable energy solution with regard to what the environmental impact might be. The County’s role should be to work towards zoning and land use plans that support adaptation to the local installation of green energy options such as solar and possibly tidal power. The County can partner in any conditional use permits required for such siting.

Palmateer: I am in favor of siting utility-scale solar installations in key locations throughout the county, keeping in mind that their location will play a critical role in their success environmentally, socially and in their productive capacity. I am especially excited about the prospect of dual-use zoning for solar energy production in service of agricultural efforts.

While tidal energy generators are still in their infancy and not yet widely used, they may become a key solution for renewable energy in San Juan County. More direct research on implementation is needed, especially in our fragile ecosystem, but in the meantime, I am optimistic that tidal power will become one of the least impactful energy resources of the near future.

5. Do you plan to encourage electrification of transportation for the people, and if so, how?

Minney: The ability to increase our electrical vehicle infrastructure is a real investment for climate resiliency through the reduction/elimination of emissions as well as it’s benefit to the County budget over time. I will partner with public agencies and taxing districts to help make charging stations possible at all public facilities, help harmonize any regulations about charging stations, and work with Town and Ports to clear a path for charging stations. Otherwise, the County will focus on electrification of its own fleets of vehicles.

Palmateer: As co-founder and President of the San Juan Islands Electric Vehicle Association, I

have taken a leading role in encouraging electrification of our transportation system, helping to make San Juan County the leader in EV ownership in Washington State. Through its outreach initiatives, SJIEVA has taken San Juan County from 55 registered vehicles in 2016 to over 427 today, an increase of 676% in just four years. I will continue to lead in this area by working to mandate replacement of all retired county vehicles with all electric equivalents. Expanded use of electric vehicles will help reduce the cost to operate our fleet. We will continue to expand our public charging infrastructure and encourage all-electric public transportation with a goal of achieving a fossil free San Juan County by 2033.

6. What energy efficiency standards would you propose for new construction in SJC?

Minney: Although this is out of my area of expertise, I understand that some of the most important things we can do are to improve standards for weatherization, insulation, and windows in building codes. We can't mandate things like heat pumps, but we can encourage the use of heat pumps in building guidelines giving the resident (and the planet) cost and efficiency benefits.

Palmateer: Having organized the San Juan Islands Green Home Tour for the past four years, I know that a one-size-fits-all approach to green home construction does not fit a majority of our pocketbooks. Passivhaus, LEED certification and other building targets are beautiful examples of what can be done when cost is not a concern, but they are not a financial reality for most of us. Home heating is the single largest energy component of new residential construction, so I propose increasing building envelope requirements to hold heat in efficiently, while providing for appropriate air circulation and that low-cost high-efficiency ductless heat pumps be used as the primary source of electric heating and cooling. I will also support improving energy efficiency standards on domestic hot water heaters and home appliances including washers, dryers and freezers.

7. How important is broadband connectivity to economic development and quality of life in SJC?

Minney: We all know that broadband opens the door on opportunities for jobs working from home without having to live in the big city for such a luxury. It will enable our younger residents to have living wage jobs in the broader economy but be able to raise their children while living in a small island community. This is very supportive of diversifying the local economy and contributing to an attainable and satisfying quality of life.

Palmateer: In my view, access to the internet should be considered a human right. The pandemic has taught us the importance of fast, reliable internet connectivity for a wide range of essential services: telecommuting for our jobs, telemedicine for our health, making sure our children can still receive a quality education, for staying in touch with friends and family across long distances when travel is not an option and more. Internet connectivity is critical to the future of San Juan County economic development and quality of life. We must do everything in our power to expand it to every home and business in San Juan County.

8. How will you address disparities in access to broadband – especially for seniors in need of remote telemedicine and households with kids in school?

Minney: There are currently member assistance programs through OPALCO to help with access to broadband, and Rock Island is providing free internet for children who need it at home to teleschool, but the County can help in the long run by trying to find and facilitate funding from state or federal resources to help provide assistance to low income seniors and families.

Palmateer: The San Juan County Council does not control the fiber optic lines or the LTE signal

that comes to our homes and businesses. However, there are many in our county who simply do not have access to that critical infrastructure. Given the breadth of the services broadband internet provides to our residents, I will do everything within my power to expand access to broadband services to all residents of San Juan County. I will work closely with Rock Island Communications to determine the most expeditious method to accomplishing broadband for all.

9. Given our need to firm up local renewables with power generated on the mainland (when the sun doesn't shine, wind doesn't blow and batteries fully discharged), how important is hydropower in your vision of the County's future energy supply?

Minney: The reality of living on an island is that there is no viable plan that can produce all of our electricity needs – if we stretch really hard, we can produce a significant fraction but it's still only a fraction. This makes the “cable to the mainland” essential, and that cable carries hydropower. Our guaranteed 86% clean, Bonneville hydropower is what makes living here affordably possible, and we need to preserve access to it.

Palmateer: Hydroelectric power is the only renewable energy source that provides enough power for our existing base load demand. The only additional options are gas-emitting fossil fuels or nuclear energy. While hydroelectric power has the smallest greenhouse gas footprint of any energy resource, it does have an impact on the environment. Until we are able to harvest enough renewable energy locally to meet our demand, hydropower is the best option for San Juan County for uninterrupted power to our residents.

10. Where will you draw the line between local energy resilience and island aesthetics?

Minney: I imagine there is some push back to the appearance of solar installations, but I see them as a sign that a place is thinking toward the future and being environmentally sensitive. I don't see a conflict between aesthetics and finding ways to generate renewable energy if it means making the right choice for the environment and its people.

Palmateer: As I have said, locating renewable energy facilities thoughtfully will go a long way to determining how much or how little our rural character and natural environment is impacted by them. Maintaining our ecological and rural identity will require limiting any sprawl created by these resources so they do not become eyesores. However, if managed properly they can be neutral or even attractive additions to our community that will serve as a point of pride. Finding a balance between our needs and the needs of nature will be critical in the planning process and any future development.

11. How would you promote SJC as a model of energy sustainability? How would visitors participate?

Minney: Lobbying Washington State DOT to electrify our local ferry fleet first and in a timely manner would allow for SJC (in the context of tourism) to promote itself from the moment the boat leaves the dock. Local Businesses are beginning to offer the ability to rent electric bikes which will lead into electric vehicles and that allows for great opportunity to participate in the evolution of becoming carbon free while visiting. In the future, educating visitors on the way we have begun creating our own power utilizing our natural resources such as sun, wind, or tides is powerful and appropriate.

Palmateer: The pandemic has taught us the importance of a year-round economy, one less reliant on tourist dollars and less susceptible to major disruptions. Building an energy sustainable county would include increased local production of renewable energy, reduction of forest fire risk through biogasification and forest management, reduction of overall greenhouse gas emissions, improvement of soil fertility using biochar in support of local agriculture, and carbon

sequestration. Coupling these efforts with county-wide reliable access to fiber-optic net neutral broadband internet and zero emission transportation will put San Juan County in a position of national leadership on sustainable practices. This in turn could be made part of an outreach to visitors wanting to learn how we made a community decision to transition to a more sustainable future and how we have succeeded.

12. What do you see as San Juan County Council's role in working with OPALCO and Rock Island?

Minney: The main role is working together on land use and permitting so that electrical and broadband infrastructure can be built. A secondary role is working on local building codes and other standards to drive energy efficiency, promoting infrastructure for electrical vehicles, coordinating between all of the local government agencies to enable renewable energy programs and electrifying all county infrastructure with a strong solar component.

Palmateer: One of the primary duties of the county council is ensuring financial solvency and making responsible choices about the use of public funds. So too is OPALCO's mission making sure that each dollar of the cooperative's money is put to its most effective and most responsible use. I see a natural partnership with OPALCO and Rock Island in making sure county government together with our energy co-op and local internet service provider make the best possible choices based on best science and sound management that reflect the will of the residents of San Juan County.