

District 2 Responses to OPALCO Questions

District 2 Candidates – 4 year term

- Rick Hughes
- Cindy Wolf

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

Hughes: We islanders are self-sufficient people and the way we power our daily lives should mirror that fact. To do so, we should seek an overall reduction in our reliance on the mainland power grid through small-scale distributed power generation. This option- where clean energy is created in the county and distributed throughout our community - would allow for increased energy sovereignty with minimal impact on our environment. Solar, wind, micro-hydro, biomass and tidal generators are all great options for clean energy generation and should be considered. In the meantime, the county should free up capacity on the local grid by generating its own solar power so OPALCO can focus its resources on our residents. San Juan County and OPALCO have long been partners in serving our community and should continue to focus on how we can best benefit our citizens now and in the long term.

Wolf: I am not an energy expert, but I think our goal has to be energy independence. We won't get there overnight but that needs to be our goal. I think we get there by reducing demand, i.e., conservation, and by producing and purchasing as much renewable energy as we can. The last thing we want to be doing is exacerbating climate change.

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?

Hughes: Energy management is a passion of mine that I have been researching for decades. I find the various renewable energy options and how they fit into a larger power grid fascinating and consider the topic extremely relevant to our life here in the islands. I've spent hours picking the brains of local leaders in the industry to better understand how, specifically, we must manage the renewable resources in our backyard. But I also regularly attend legislative hearings on energy; work with House and Senate Energy Subcommittees; and serve with other local leaders in groups such as the River Treaty Task Force. Stepping back to learn about our energy from this perspective has been incredibly valuable throughout my years in office and I feel the cumulative knowledge gained is one of my biggest contributions to our efforts to become a more sustainable, environmentally conscious and self-sustained community.

Wolf: I live with a physicist skilled and currently employed as an electrical engineer who has a strong interest in renewable energy technology. He works for a company that depends on the health of salmon fisheries. We have always worked visits to power generation facilities of different kinds into our family vacations and often discuss issues like how much solar cell surface it would take to power the county and what the latest battery technology means for the ability to balance wind and solar generation with high demand during the times when these renewable sources are unavailable. I am also familiar with the work being done by the Transition groups in the islands and I've read OPALCO's plan for near-term future.

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?

Hughes: It goes without saying that ensuring our community access to quality and affordable energy is essential. Considering my position that we should be generating and distributing this power locally as much as possible, any facility installed to do so would, therefore, also be essential. Does this provide a mandate to energy generation and storage over its surrounding environment? Certainly not. I believe an energy source should be deemed 'compatible with the natural environment' if all efforts have been made to integrate it into existing resources and previously developed land before pursuing other options. There may very well be a need for larger installations with site requirements that just don't fit such criteria - and that may be fine in some situations. But ultimately, I feel a largely self-sufficient power grid is an important goal for our community that we can achieve using renewable resources in a responsible way.

Wolf: a) In my opinion, an alternative energy source compatible with the natural environment makes good use of available renewable resources (sun, wind, water) in such a way that minimal damage is done to the existing ecosystem and the overall tradeoffs in environmental degradation are worth the reduction in our contribution to climate change and the increase in our energy resilience. Making those determinations requires not just technical knowledge but community buy-in. **b)** We live on a group of islands, with all of the vulnerability that implies. I believe local renewable energy production and storage must be regarded as essential public facilities. When the power from the mainland goes out for any extended period we must be able to support emergency services and protect the most vulnerable members of our population.

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

Hughes: As mentioned above, we should always prioritize the use of existing structures and previously developed land before building new structures or further developing - for the sake of energy distribution or anything else. That said, I anticipate there will be times when a bigger project needs a different space than what our current resources can provide. So long as due diligence is done to confirm short and long term impacts to the local environs, and these impacts weighed against the benefits of the proposed project, such installations may also prove necessary... but, again, only if we've tried to make use of what we already have. I feel tidal generators may also have potential in a future energy plan, and would apply the same principles: do the work to determine if we can gain more energy autonomy with minimal negative impact on our environment.

Wolf: I don't see how we move toward a goal of energy independence without providing for utility-scale solar installations. Finding land suitable for this purpose might be accomplished through land swaps and possibly in collaboration with our agricultural community. There is quite a bit of land in the county more suitable for grazing than for crop production. Livestock don't seem to mind grazing under solar panels and the lease income could provide steady income for local farmers. Proper siting will be important for achieving public acceptance. Tidal generation is still in its early stages of development but it would appear to be a logical choice for an archipelago. If the technology develops to a point where adverse impacts to the ocean ecosystem can be kept to a minimum it ought to be part of our future. However, because the placement of tidal generators would likely be in state waters, permitting and regulation would not fall under county jurisdiction. But the county would want to have a say in how and where generators were located.

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

Hughes: I think it important for us to do all that we can to encourage clean energy and I feel the County must lead by example to encourage the rest of our community to follow suit. Thus far we:

- Have begun transitioning its fleet to hybrid or high fuel standard vehicles
- Use boats to transport employees around the county

- Strongly encourage car-pooling
- Have stationed electric vehicles at the ferry landing to use as park-and-ride options
- Have three EV charging stations currently in use and are researching the deployment of others around the county
- Have spent years lobbying in Olympia for the electrification of our ferries

Electrifying our transportation is one of the biggest ways we can protect our environment and leading by example is always the best way to facilitate change. We are the change we want to see and love to share that message with our community.

Wolf: The County can encourage electrification of transportation by providing or collaborating with others to provide charging stations in suitable locations. County fleet vehicles should be replaced with electric vehicles as they are rotated out of service. The county should investigate what it can legally do to encourage local shuttle and taxi services to convert to all electric service. Hotels, B&Bs and vacation rentals could also be given incentives to install charging stations. The Port Commissions might be interested in partnering with OPALCO, the County and private partners to provide electric car and scooter rentals for visitors. Perhaps, in the longer term, we can convince the State to replace a few of our ferries with smaller, passenger only ferries. Those ferries should be coupled with electric rental vehicles on both ends. The council could explore cooperation of such an effort with the City of Anacortes, the Port of Anacortes and Skagit County.

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

Hughes: As with any such proposal, I feel extensive research and discussion would be necessary before adopting any set of standards. A survey of “best-in-class” county codes relevant to our climate and types of construction would prove critical, followed by discussions with leaders in the trades, and the environmental and safety fields. The goal would be to maximize energy efficiency and minimize our carbon footprint while meeting the unique needs of each of our island communities.

Wolf: As great as the LEED standards are they are a difficult proposition for affordable housing because of cost. If we deviate from state codes and standards, I think we need to focus on standards that will make residential construction more energy efficient by the lowest cost means. One example is passive solar construction. Despite our reputation in the Pacific Northwest for gray winters most of us know that our coldest winter days are generally clear and sunny. Making use of the sun on those days to store heat is a low cost approach. Better, tighter building envelopes (coupled with appropriate air exchange systems) is another cost effective way to reduce energy use. These are the kinds of things we need to be looking at to improve energy conservation without making our housing stock even more expensive than it already is.

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

Hughes: Especially since the onset of Covid - and all of the remote work and schooling it has necessitated - I think it is clear that Broadband connectivity is a fundamentally necessary service in today’s world. Broadband has been instrumental in improving our connectivity and diversifying our economy. Today we can get Gigabit connections, nearly County wide cell coverage, and soon, an improved 911 Public Safety Radio Network. As your County Commissioner, I will continue to support the deployment of broadband service.

Wolf: The COVID pandemic has demonstrated very clearly that one of the more damaging inequities we face as a country involves internet access. In San Juan County, I think broadband connectivity is essential to quality of life. During the pandemic it has allowed a transition to online schooling, medical consultations, and mental health care. In the long run it will allow far more

efficient work patterns for caregivers and other workers in a county of islands. The economic impact of broadband access is enormous. People who can do much of their work remotely have in the past few months begun to move out of cities and into more rural places like San Juan County, a phenomenon which is increasing our real estate prices right now. Broadband makes basing an online business here possible and gives all of us the opportunity to connect with new ideas, developments and project partners all over the world. But we must ensure that it's available to everyone.

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

Hughes: What our broadband providers have made possible in the islands over the past several years has been downright amazing. Lately, providing for all the children attending school from home this year has been a top priority and their extra efforts to fill that gap have been commendable. We must now turn our focus to the rest of our community and continue to expand broadband access to all corners of the island. Children, adults and seniors alike all deserve this increasingly critical service and the County will continue to support these efforts as a conduit for State and Federal funding and as a partner in logistics, outreach and planning.

Wolf: As I said above, I see this as a big equity issue. But the county council doesn't own or control the infrastructure that makes our internet service possible. The council can't do much more than work with Rock Island to try to ensure that our school-age kids and our seniors have affordable access. I understand Rock Island has worked with the public school districts to provide free wi-fi hotspots for online schooling and I commend them for doing so but I'd like to see them do more to ensure that access is more equitably distributed. Our senior centers, perhaps working with the newly funded San Juan County LTC Care coordination Network and the in-home evaluation programs our EMS and fire departments have put in place, would be the logical point of outreach to find out who among our senior population is in need of access to broadband for telemedicine. Agency collaboration is key and as a council member I will do whatever I can make access more equitable.

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?

Hughes: Hydropower has been and continues to be an incredibly valuable renewable energy source for the Pacific Northwest. Legislation like WA State's CETA (Clean Energy Transformation Act), and the proliferation of RPS (Renewable Portfolio Standards) legislation in the West, coupled with the rapid closure of coal-fired generation plants will make PNW Hydro more valuable as a reliable source of power. It is a crucial resource to balance an increasing amount of wind and solar as California's recent power difficulties so plainly demonstrate.

Wolf: I do not see how we get to zero CO2 emissions by 2030 without hydropower. We are fortunate to have it. However, hydropower is not without significant negative impacts that we must acknowledge and address. Scores of dams were built in this state without fish ladders even though state law in effect at the time they were built mandated fish ladders. It has had a terrible impact on salmon runs and, in turn, the Orca population.

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

Hughes: I think the citizens must help us draw that line. It is why I routinely meet with OPALCO. Our island aesthetics are of great importance. I have no doubt that we can continue to work together as a community to provide the energy we need while doing this in a responsible way.

Wolf: To my mind, it is impossible to make generalizations on this issue. However, given the importance of energy resilience to emergency services and essential functions local renewable energy facilities have to be considered essential public facilities. But the county needs clear standards for siting such facilities that allow meaningful public participation.

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

Hughes: The first thing to do is learn more! We can see what other Island communities are doing. Some that come to mind are the Orkney Islands, just north of the top of Scotland. They have quite advanced goals and experiments with many types of renewable energy, including wind, solar, and tidal. Another island to watch is Kauai, where their local electric cooperative is moving toward a 100% renewable grid. In Denmark, Samsø Island has been very effective at expanding renewable energy while decreasing carbon emissions. I think we need to first build ourselves up to become that model and then proceed from there.

Wolf: The most obvious county role here is to help local businesses, organizations and homeowners publicize and promote their innovative approaches to energy sustainability. My goal in doing that would be to help other locals see what's possible and think about what they can do in their own business, organization or home. That will further our efforts toward local sustainability. My focus would not be on visitor participation.

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

Hughes: OPALCO and Rock Island have been good partners. As we see more local power generation and storage we will continue to find ways of doing this responsibly. We all want the many benefits of power and broadband while at the same time we want these services to be provided responsibly and in harmony with our community values. OPALCO is us. It is a member cooperative. Just as the County is us. We all live here. So I have total confidence that we will continue to cooperate for the good of everyone just as we have been doing.

Wolf: The county council, OPALCO and Rock Island share the same constituency. The relationship should be one of collaboration and synergy as much as possible. We need to be working together to do what's in the public interest and to promote equity.