

Board chair
Nafisa Fai

OPB: Is Washington County currently striking the right balance between protecting rural areas and farm land and allowing development for economic growth and housing construction? Are there ways you think the county should adjust that balance?

Fai: Washington County is not yet striking the right balance and we need to be honest about that. We can protect our farmland and rural character while still creating the jobs and housing our residents, but only if we focus on smart growth in the right places.

Washington County is home to some of the world's best soils and a strong agricultural economy, and that must remain protected. At the same time, we are also home to world-class companies that drive innovation and opportunity. The path forward is not choosing one over the other, it's being more intentional about how we support both.

That means focusing economic development inside our urban growth boundaries and removing barriers to building on the industrial land we already have. We need to invest in core infrastructure like water, sewer, and broadband, strengthen our education and workforce systems, and better coordinate regionally to recruit and retain high-quality jobs.

I would also push for a clearer regional and statewide inventory of industrial lands so we can make smarter, data-driven decisions about where growth belongs. Striking the right balance requires discipline: protecting what makes Washington County unique while being proactive and strategic about where and how we grow.

OPB: Washington County was one of the counties hardest hit by the escalation in immigration enforcement last year. Is there anything more Washington County can do to protect its immigrant residents if we see another surge in ICE activity? In what ways, if any, should the county work with the federal government when it comes to immigration?

Washington County is a home rule county, and that means we have real authority and responsibility to take meaningful action to protect the safety, dignity, and well-being of our residents. I firmly believe in always asking what more we can do to ensure our systems actively protect people from harm.

We are not powerless in protecting our immigrant residents and I have already demonstrated what that looks like in practice. When immigration enforcement activity escalated, I called for a state of emergency, pushed to reaffirm Oregon's sanctuary laws, and secured immediate support for impacted families. I also helped unlock an additional \$4 million to prevent housing instability and keep families safe and stable.

I also brought the voices of Washington County residents to the national stage. At the invitation of Senator Jeff Merkley, I spoke at the People's State of the Address to share what I've heard directly from our community, the fear, disruption, and real harm that aggressive enforcement has caused here at home.

That is what leadership looks like. It is not about avoiding difficult or uncomfortable decisions—it is about taking action to protect your community, even when it is not easy or politically convenient.

As an immigrant and refugee, this issue is deeply personal to me. I know what it feels like when systems create fear instead of safety. When immigration enforcement escalates, it does not just affect individuals, it destabilizes entire families and communities.

Going forward, Washington County must continue to uphold Oregon's sanctuary laws and ensure that county resources are never used to support federal immigration enforcement. We should expand partnerships with trusted community organizations to provide legal support, know-your-rights education, and emergency assistance for families in crisis.

As Chair, I will always prioritize the dignity, safety, and stability of every resident. I do not believe that counties should work with the federal government on matters of immigration, unless they have judicial warrants.

OPB: Last year the county tried to strike a balance with its DEI policies between upholding its values and not making a target of itself for the Trump administration. Was this the right approach? Why or why not? What would you do going forward?

Equity is non-negotiable in how I believe government should serve its residents. To me, equity is not a political slogan, it is a moral responsibility to ensure every resident has the freedom and opportunity to thrive.

Last year, when the board was considering to rescind the Washington County's 2020 equity

resolution in response to political pressure from the federal administration, I did not believe that was the right approach. That resolution represented an important commitment by the county to embed equity into how we serve our community, including the creation of an Equity Office and formal accountability structures.

I stepped in and opposed rescinding it. Instead, I proposed an alternative approach that preserved our equity commitments while clearly grounding county policy in compliance with federal, state, and local law, including protections against unlawful discrimination. My focus was on ensuring we do not abandon our values in response to political pressure, while still maintaining legal clarity and public trust.

Going forward, I believe leadership requires consistency. We should not scale back our core commitments out of fear of being targeted. The role of county government is to stand firmly in its values and ensure those values are reflected in how we budget, make decisions, and deliver services.

I have spent my whole career leading with courage, fostering collaboration with a commitment to results that strengthen our communities. True leadership is not about putting your head down or avoiding difficult or uncomfortable decisions. It is about taking the actions necessary to protect our residents and advance freedom and opportunity even when those decisions are uncomfortable or leave you standing alone.

I will continue to lead with the principle that we do not retreat from our responsibility to ensure fairness and access for every resident of Washington County.

OPB: How do you plan to approach the tightening budget that Washington County and jurisdictions across the state face? Would you consider incremental cuts county wide or larger cuts to a few specific departments? Would you consider new taxes or other means of raising funds to prevent cuts?

As County Commissioner since 2021, I've managed through repeated budget shortfalls, from \$31.1 million in FY 2022–23, \$25.3 million in FY 2023–24, and a projected \$20.1 million gap. These experiences showed me that our challenges are both revenue- and expenditure driven and require more than cuts. They demand innovation and collaboration.

Although I do believe all improvements are incremental, I would not rely on incremental, across-the-board cuts countywide because that tends to weaken core services without addressing underlying structural issues. I also would not support disproportionate cuts

concentrated in a few departments in a way that destabilizes essential public safety or human services systems. Instead, I would take a targeted, data-driven approach that starts with protecting core services residents rely on, public safety, housing stability, and human services while also identifying efficiencies and consolidations across the organization. In terms of potential cuts, I believe that any necessary reductions would have to be made strategically based on outcomes and impact, not evenly applied. The goal would be to preserve essential services while improving efficiency.

As County Chair, I will convene stakeholders across all jurisdictions to explore fair revenue-sharing and creative funding options. For example, compensation for county services such as tax collection or operating the jail, while reducing waste and expanding transparency through participatory budgeting process. My priority as Chair would be to protect essential services, improve efficiency, and ensure any revenue decisions are made transparently and with accountability.

OPB: As chair how would you help the board of commissioners maintain good working relationships among members and county staff even when disagreements arise?

Leadership is about how you show up when there is disagreement. I am in my sixth year on the Board of Commissioners, and I've served through moments of strong differences of opinion. I've learned that effective governance requires both conviction and the ability to bring people together without confusing collaboration with inaction.

My approach is rooted in respect, preparation, and staying focused on outcomes rather than personalities. I believe disagreement is part of the job, but it should never become personal or prevent the county from moving forward.

I have a track record of working across differences to get things done. For example, I successfully advanced a tobacco flavor ban ordinance that passed 3-2, proposed a feasibility analysis on homeless pod villages that gained board approval, and worked across lines of disagreement on transportation policy to secure consensus where it did not initially exist. In some cases, I have been the lone dissenting voice, and in others, I have been the deciding vote. Leadership means being willing to make the call when it matters not just when it is comfortable.

As Chair, I would bring that same approach to leadership in three ways:

- First, by building relationships early and consistently so that trust is in place when difficult decisions arise.

- Second, by ensuring every commissioner and staff member is heard, treated with respect and dignity, while keeping discussions grounded in facts, outcomes, and shared goals for the community.
- Third, by maintaining transparency with the public through regular engagement, including town halls and structured opportunities for feedback, so decision-making is not happening in isolation.

It is important to recognize that most of the people on the Board of Washington County Commissioners are not running for reelection. In the upcoming election, three seats will be on the ballot, the Chair position, District 2, and District 4, meaning two new commissioners will be elected. In addition, when I am elected as Chair, my current District 1 seat would be filled through an appointment process by board with the public for the remainder of the term, resulting in a Board that includes three new members.

Washington County Board of Commissioners will have a historic opportunity to reset how the Board works together, strengthen collaboration, and ensure we are grounded in shared purpose from the beginning.

As Chair, I will focus on building strong working relationships early, setting clear expectations for collaboration, and keeping the Board centered on delivering results for Washington County residents.