



## Questions for Justice of the Peace Judicial Courts Candidates Conservative Coalition of Harris County

*This questionnaire will be posted onto the Conservative Coalition of Harris County website for public voter viewing.*

Candidate Name	Position for which Candidate is Running
Russ Ridgway	Justice of the Peace, Precinct 5 Place 1

*Please give your answer to each of the following questions and please include your rationale with each answer. Please be concise and clear.*

- Please describe the qualifications and experience that make you the best candidate for the office for which you are running.

**Answer:**  
 My judicial experience on this bench for the past 16.5 years and over 1 million cases filed and adjudicated in a very efficient manner is a starting point. By using management skills from high level international consulting, managing operational departments in large energy companies, using continuous improvement processes to innovate both legal and technical solutions for a well-trained staff add to our efficient court. Moving over 5500 cases per month and reaching disposition of those cases (by trials, arraignments, motions and timely docket scheduling) using the latest technologies helps the public to experience a user-friendly court system. Since introducing e-filing capabilities in mid-2018, over 69% of all civil cases are e-filed in our court, while the total civil case filings are the largest in Texas (in 2019 over 24,000 civil cases filed in JP 5-1) I serve on the Texas Judicial Committee on Information Technology (Texas Supreme Court) as advisory member and submitted the first ever statewide survey of e-filing in justice courts in December 2019. I have taught docket and backlog management to new JP's state-wide through Texas Justice Court Training Center and have served as a resource to Texas legislative committees. My judicial experience is both wide and deep as a conservative principled public servant.

2. Please describe what you believe are the most significant issues in this race and why.

**Answer:**

It is very important for the JP courts to be readily available to the large and varied issues for this largest precinct in Texas (1.5 million population and growing). At the same time, we must be able to manage increasing legislative initiatives, staffing levels and mandated reporting demands. Perhaps the largest single issue this year will be the doubling of the jurisdictional limits for civil cases to \$20,000 in September. This will shift some cases that would be otherwise filed in Harris County Civil Courts of Law to our JP Courts. Unsettled budgeting to manage the anticipated increase (I believe 27% to possibly 50% increase) could swamp the efficient operations already in place. Without adequate resources, the courts may involuntarily slow down, translated delaying justice (which flies in the face of our Bill of Rights). I believe that my judicial management experience during this time of rapid growth is critical and would overwhelm any less experienced administrator.

3. Please list the undergraduate colleges or universities, law schools and any other graduate schools that you attended, the years you attended, the degrees you received and the years of any and all graduations.

**Answer:**

Bachelor of Science-Petroleum Engineering, Marietta College (Ohio) Graduated 1973

MBA Finance, University of Houston, Graduated 1979 while working and traveling for large interstate gas pipeline company (now owned by Kinder Morgan).

Executive Management Program, University of Kansas (Completed 1984-1986)

Sharing educational experience: Serving as Moot court judge: University of Houston Law School (numerous times, most recently 2019)

Active member, Texas Bar Association-Justice Court section (expert panelist on property issues, most recently 2019)

4. Should JPs need to have law degrees? Why or why not?

**Answer:**

No. While a law degree might be nice, the need for legal training provided by law schools prepares the student to be an advocate for either a plaintiff or defendant party. Judges are to be autonomous and weigh evidence without partiality. JP's are community elected to understand and relate to the people within their community, not catering only to legal arguments. Many people filing in our courts are intimidated by the thought that the judge is an attorney.

My experience is that they feel more comfortable in sharing with a non-lawyer judge. JP's attend mandatory and continuing education classes taught by the Texas Justice Court Training Center, and the Texas Justice Court Judges Association among others. These excellent programs deal with the specific, yet wide-ranging topics and technologies that we experience every day. Over 90% of JP's in Texas are not attorneys and in Harris County until recently 50% were not attorneys. Limiting JP's to a law degree only would eliminate many other potential officeholders with business or governmental experience from being considered as even better administrators. Some attorneys defer to me as a judge on any math related matters. Some authors have proposed that law school only credentials should be eliminated in higher level courts. You do not need law school credentials to serve on the United States Supreme Court.

5. What will carry the greatest influence in your rulings: criminal and/or civil case law, the Constitution, state statutes, or other?

**Answer:**

Rulings in our courts depend on the formality of the type of case. For both criminal and civil jury trials, the JP's should be following appropriate Code requirements (directions, motions, objections, testimony and evidence allowed or not). Even in these settings, a JP has extraordinary discretion to ask questions to help develop the facts of the case (unlike many higher-level courts). In all other non-jury cases, I follow the oath to uphold the Constitution (mostly within the Bill of Rights) and the laws of the State of Texas. The Justice Courts of Texas use specifically designed civil rules that were implemented in September 2013. I had the privilege of being one of 10 JP's to serve on the Texas Supreme Court Task Force to develop those user-friendly rules. The ability of the parties to concisely present their case using common sense when written agreements were not read or understood carries some weight on a case by case basis.

6. Please identify what changes can be made to the county JP court system to make it more efficient from your point of view.

**Answer:**

Efficiency in any organization is a combination of policies, procedures, practices and compliance, with leadership that promotes speedy, accurate and careful consideration of consequences when goals and objectives cannot be attained. Harris County is unique in that we centralize many policy and procedures through county-wide departments, but many practice issues are under the purview of the Court Manager's Office. We rely upon their influence to provide technical, legal and oversight on common issues. Our court has pushed for numerous management tools that would enhance our effectiveness (in part as former Chair of Justice Court Technology for Harris County). Our experience using the current 3<sup>rd</sup> party case management system frustrates daily court operations with slow and sometimes unstable computer performance.

As one of a few mega-courts, we are physically limited in terms of courtroom and courthouse capacity, and from time to time with understaffing to meet efficiency goals. A third JP Court strategically located within our precinct would be much more desirable than political redistricting. This is beyond JP control, although adequate budgeting to hire and retain adequate staffing could alleviate time in line and phone line issues. While being a strong advocate for limited government, we must also be cognizant of increased security and cybersecurity threats to our very sensitive data.

7. Please describe the changes you will make to improve the efficiency of your court (the ideal workload balance for your court in hours-per-week allocated to court sessions, case review in the office, training, collaboration, etc.).

**Answer:**

I measure efficiency in terms of many metric measurements. The most controllable metric is to balance case filings with case dispositions (judgments, dismissals, destruction of ancient cases). Our court in total cleared over 100% of cases filed in 2019, and in many years in the high 90% range. This prevents from backlog accumulation. Employee turnover increased in 2015-2017 due to less competitive salaries (increased minimum wage structure). This turnover created an unintended increase in civil disposition backlog. that we are currently addressing. At the same time civil new case filings have dramatically increased.

A second metric is to manage time from first event after case filing to final disposition. Our court is highly efficient with cases when no attorney-directed actions are imposed. On criminal cases (Class C misdemeanors) our time from filing to disposition is approximately 5-6 months. Most larger courts and many smaller courts take much longer. Future success will highly depend upon adequate staffing, enhanced and stable software, and courtroom space which all require adequate budgeting of scarce resources. We make extensive use of court ordered mediation to resolve over 50% of civil case filings. We load our court with well-planned dockets up to five times per day, 5 days per week and vary the docket size in response to variations in case types filed. We are a fine-tuned organization.

8. Please explain your view of recidivism and how it affects the sentences you give (traffic court-DUI, etc.).

**Answer:**

Recidivism occurs in several different ways. Repeat filings for the same reasons in criminal cases is unusual, for truancy court failure to attend school cases is rare and for civil cases the number of appearances for a single case to address discovery and legal motions is very common. Even in the past when school cases were subject to criminal penalties (taking away ability to get or retain driver's licenses or issuing warrants) our repeat filings for the same type of offense was less than 0.01% out of approximately 4000 filed cases per year. Most persons appearing in our court get the message the first time.

We are highly concerned with increased higher-level crimes being committed, in lieu of attending school to secure an education. We work with parents to improve their accountability for their family. I support home-schooling parents when properly done. I believe that good community and faith-based groups in Harris County offer encouragement and support for many dysfunctional situations. Our court offers resource guides and brochures to interested parties when needed.

9. Please explain why you do, or do not, support applying term limits to JP court judges.

**Answer:**

JP Judges deal with a wider spectrum of cases than virtually any other court. For the knowledge attained in dealing with so many issues across their communities, I believe that imposing term limits are not a good idea. Long serving JP's mostly do not seek higher level elected positions because their passion for serving their local community is strong. When family, health or aging issues occur, most JP judges know when to retire.

Some higher-level elected officials as well as professionals from law enforcement and medical careers have told me the most satisfying parts of their career came from serving as a JP. People seeking JP positions typically affiliate with a political party that generally supports the same Christian values and positions that are consistent with their own privately held beliefs. Unfortunately, political values and positions change in parties creating some undesired outcomes. It is then that an individual JP must decide to make proper value decisions or let the voters tell them otherwise. Harris County has been blessed with many long-serving JP's who have sacrificed more lucrative opportunities/careers. JP Judges J Kent Adams, Bill Yeoman, Paul Heath Till, Louis Ditta, Richard Vara, Joanne Delgado and others now departed all have provided excellent long-term services to our county and beyond to state and national causes.

10. Do you believe that voluntary professional and community service is a necessary commitment for persons holding public office? What forms of voluntary professional and community service have you been involved with in the past? Currently?
- Answer:**  
 Absolutely important. Long term service to our community needs creates confidence and trust by and to volunteers. We want the best opportunities for our families in our neighborhoods and beyond. We learn to work together for the greater good of city, county, state and country by being involved. My main long-term commitments have been to my faith home Chapelwood United Methodist Church and through leadership positions in Boy Scouting. At Chapelwood, I have served as adult Bible school teacher, usher, lifetime member of Board of Stewards, and other church-wide positions and activities for over 45 years. My current scouting roles are an extension from being a Cub Scout to my great childhood camping experiences learning real life survival skills (first aid, lifesaving, cooking, navigation among others) and opportunities like a National and a World Jamboree. Current roles include Board member of Sam Houston Area Council, and District Chair for Aquila District and volunteer service for numerous scouting events. I carefully consider new opportunities to minimize possibility of getting over-extended.
11. How would you prepare yourself to handle cases involving unfamiliar areas of the law?
- Answer:**  
 I use resources such as having relevant Texas statutes on the bench, online access to Texas laws and the training center, and access to Harris County staff attorney as needed. As a large court, we may be the first to see cases for which no statutes exist, no apparent case law and no attorneys are involved. In these rare cases, we may take case under advisement to discuss matters with available legal counsel. With attorney cases, we may, but rarely do, ask them to prepare a brief with their understanding of relevant issues. I attend frequent training classes to review recent appellate court decisions or newly enacted laws.
12. Is it appropriate to impose more restrictions on what cases go to trial? Is there a need for more mandatory mediation and settlement efforts? What specifically do you propose to do about this, if elected?
- Answer:**  
 In Texas virtually any case could go to trial. Our court holds pre-trial conferences with both parties to determine which proposed exhibits are contested between the parties and to pre-admit them so that trial time is not wasted. Our court believes that free court-ordered mediation on the same day as trial is highly beneficial. We use the mediation services of the Dispute Resolution Center to allow the parties to resolve or reset cases. This highly successful program results in over 50% of contested cases being settled without trial. Most of the time, the parties are relieved and pleased to save time and money associated with formal trials. For many cases, mediation offers the first time the parties have met face to face. A few times, the parties waive mediation and go directly to trial. As a mediator in my former career, I find mediation as opposed to expensive arbitration to be very beneficial for all involved.

13. When and if would you consider alternative sentences for non-violent offenders?

**Answer:**

If you mean by this question, alternative ways of satisfying a judgment, other than by paying a fine, then we are required to consider the defendants ability to pay. Such alternatives may include payment plans or performing community service at a non-profit organization. Beyond these alternatives we consider the defendant's financial status and may make a finding of indigency.

14. As a voter, should the election of judges be changed in any way (schedule, appointment, term, term-limited, non-partisan, etc.)?

**Answer:**

Our current system of allowing voters to elect Justices of the Peace is reasonable and fair even though it is not non-partisan and not term limited. The issue in Harris County is that the ballot position at the very bottom of the long ballot does not encourage voters to consider these important positions. I would support a non-partisan website where each candidate could enter their responses on selected topics with no limits on word lengths, allowing side-by-side comparisons. This website should be highly advertised as a good source for information. This could be done in general elections for elected positions as well as for propositions and amendments. This would allow voters to view differing values, leadership, education, experience and community service. Any voter can then choose to become an informed voter (as suggested by George Washington) to preserve our current system of government.

Questions 15-16 relate to your viewpoints from a VOTER's point of view only. (They may have or not have any relation to your judicial philosophy and judgement.)

15. As a voter, what are the main social conservative values that you look for when voting for federal congressional candidates (House and Senate races)?

**Answer:**

1. What has candidate done for Pro-Life and Pro-Family causes?
2. What are your priorities related to legislative initiatives?
3. What are the stated values of the candidate and have their positions changed over a long period of time?
4. What prior elected positions and life experiences have prepared you for this position?
5. Have you worked in campaigns or supported candidates for federal level positions?

16. As a voter, what are the main fiscal conservative values that you look for when voting for federal congressional candidates (House and Senate races)?

**Answer:**

1. Will the candidate work towards lowering and/or maintaining low tax burdens for our taxpayers?
2. Will the candidate be willing to offer and defend conservative principles in considering and negotiating new legislation?
3. Will the candidate be willing to stand strong to represent the voters who elected them on fiscal issues?
4. What is the candidate's philosophy on limited government? Are you willing to support budgetary efforts to identify, limit or eliminate fraudulent programs, agencies or departments?
5. Do you support strong military readiness?
6. How do you recognize the balance between State's rights and federal assistance programs?
7. What is your position on forgiving federal student loan debt?

BY RETURNING THIS QUESTIONNAIRE, THE CANDIDATE ASSUMES FULL RESPONSIBILITY FOR ALL ANSWERS TO THIS QUESTIONNAIRE. THE ANSWERS ON THE FOREGOING REFLECT THE CANDIDATE'S BEST EFFORTS TO ANSWER THIS QUESTIONNAIRE HONESTLY AND DIRECTLY.

PLEASE SAVE YOUR COMPLETED QUESTIONNAIRE TO YOUR LOCAL MACHINE IN THE EVENT THAT THERE ARE ANY TECHNICAL PROBLEMS WHEN YOU ATTEMPT TO EMAIL IT BACK.

Once this questionnaire has been completed, please email it to:

[alex@cchc-pac.org](mailto:alex@cchc-pac.org)

\* **Please note:** You **must** return your questionnaire from the email address to which it was sent. Questionnaires returned from any other email address will be considered fraudulent and will **not** be recorded and no answers will be published in the voter's guide. CCHC-PAC deems a return from the proper email address as authentication of the correct respondent.