

The News Tribune endorsements: Our picks for Tacoma Municipal Court Pos. 1 and 3

By The News Tribune Editorial Board

Updated October 16, 2022 2:34 PM

The News Tribune Editorial Board conducts dozens of endorsement interviews every year. Up and down the local ballot, we talk to candidates running for offices of all sizes and statures — from U.S. senator to local school boards.

Judicial endorsement interviews are different. They require a different approach. The prospective candidates aren't invited to discuss policy proposals or their stance on partisan issues; they're there to talk about how they approach the weighty responsibility of achieving justice and ways to improve the system we've built to administer it.

This year The News Tribune Editorial Board is issuing endorsements in two contested local judicial contests: the races for Tacoma Municipal Court Pos. 1 and Pos. 3. While municipal court might seem like small potatoes — handling [cases involving misdemeanors and gross misdemeanors](#) — in many instances, municipal court represents a person's first (and hopefully last) interaction with the criminal justice system. The decisions made by local municipal court judges — good and bad — can ripple for years to come.

The encouraging news for voters is that both contested Tacoma Municipal Court races feature two qualified, impressive candidates.

For The News Tribune Editorial Board, it made for two of the most difficult decisions we faced this endorsement season.

Dee Sonntag for Tacoma Municipal Pos. 1

In the race to succeed outgoing judge David Ladenburg, who [chose not to seek reelection after nearly two decades on the bench](#), The News Tribune Editorial Board endorses [Dee Sonntag](#).

Sonntag, 39, is a public defender who boasts a background on both sides of the courtroom. In addition to her most recent work with the Pierce County Department of Assigned Counsel, where she's worked since 2015, Sonntag has experience working in the Seattle City Attorney's Office.

During The News Tribune Editorial Board's endorsement interview, Sonntag said that her experience representing clients in Tacoma Municipal Court, Pierce County District Court and Superior Court makes her uniquely qualified for the job. She also touted her

recent experience working to improve Pierce County's Felony Drug Court, and the lessons she believes can be applied at the municipal court level.

Sonntag is also active in the field and in community. She's a member of the Tacoma Pierce County Bar Association and the co-founder of [Lawyers Against Systemic Racism](#), a local group of attorneys working to confront racial discrimination in our courts.

Reed Speir, an administrative law judge with Washington State Office of Administrative Hearings and a court-appointed public defender for the last two decades, is the other candidate in the race for Tacoma Municipal Court Pos. 1. Like Sonntag, Speir is well versed in law and well aware of the impacts decisions at the municipal court level can have on people's lives. If elected, we have no doubt Speir would administer justice fairly and equitably.

But Sonntag impressed us most. She would be an excellent, much-needed addition to the Tacoma Municipal Court bench.

"I would say that my compassion really comes from not only my life experience but the experience of the clients that I've had the privilege to work with," Sonntag told The News Tribune Editorial Board. "I've worked with a diverse group of practitioners and clients that have really given me a heartbeat for trying to make our criminal justice system better."

Steve Krupa for Tacoma Municipal Pos. 3

Of all the endorsement decisions The News Tribune Editorial Board wrestled with this general election season, this one was the most difficult. Steve Krupa and Sergio Flores are both exceptional candidates, each of whom appears capable of helping to guide Tacoma Municipal Court into a better, more just and more equitable future.

After several lengthy conversations, [Krupa](#) eventually earned our nod, but we issue the endorsement with an acknowledgment: There's no bad choice in this race.

That's a good thing for voters and a good thing for Tacoma, even if it makes our job more difficult.

Krupa, 61, is a staff attorney at the Northwest Justice Project, a local organization that provides free legal aid to low-income individuals in cases involving things like housing, health care, education and other basic human needs. He's also a pro tem judge at Tacoma Municipal Court — meaning he fills in on the bench when needed — and has a military history that includes prosecuting cases as a member of the Judge Advocate General's Corps.

Over nearly three decades in law, Krupa has seen almost everything, which is likely one of the reasons he's the only candidate in the race rated "exceptionally well qualified" by the Tacoma Pierce County Bar Association. Krupa has been an attorney since 1994

and lived in Tacoma for the last 31 years, 25 of which he spent with his own law firm. In his estimation, he's been involved with "thousands and thousands of cases."

One of Krupa's most compelling campaign selling points is his experience and belief in therapeutic courts — like veterans courts, drug courts and mental health courts — that can both hold the guilty accountable and provide the services people need to improve their lives. While Pierce County Superior Court operates four therapeutic courts, currently Tacoma Municipal Court has none, Krupa noted. He believes he's the candidate best suited to help make such institutional changes a reality.

"I'm running because I believe in public service. I want to make our city safer, I want to stop recidivism, and I want to provide for better equal access to justice," Krupa told The News Tribune Editorial Board. "We have to have some compassion, and we have to have what I like to call compassionate accountability."

[Flores](#), 39, is a local prosecutor who, like Krupa, presents to voters a chance to re-imagine how Tacoma Municipal Court functions.

If elected, Flores — an immigrant who's openly gay — would help dismantle the status quo simply with the much-needed experience he would bring to the bench.

When he arrived in the United States with his family as a 10-year-old, Flores spoke no English and struggled in school, he told The News Tribune Editorial Board. Without the grades necessary to get into a four-year university and unable to join the military because of his sexual orientation, Flores worked his way through Seattle Central Community College, which he said "opened his mind" and eventually led him to study law at the University of Illinois Chicago. Simply put, Flores's story is the kind of success the United States was built on.

It's not just Flores' background that makes him a worthy candidate. After first working as a prosecutor in Tacoma, Flores now works as a prosecutor in Auburn, [where he helped to found the city's Community Court](#). The court relies on a model much like the one Krupa advocates for, helping to connect defendants with services while also addressing the underlying causes of crime.

"I want to make Tacoma Municipal Court part of the solution and not part of the problem," Flores told The News Tribune Editorial Board.

It's a worthy goal that we support.

While we think Krupa — at least right now — is better prepared for the job, we'll be thrilled with whoever wins in November.

News Tribune election endorsements reflect the views of our Editorial Board and are written by opinion editor Matt Driscoll. Other board members are: Stephanie Pedersen, News Tribune president and editor; Jim Walton, community representative; and Pamela

Transue, a community representative who serves during election season. The Editorial Board operates independently from the newsroom and does not influence the work of news reporting and editing staffs. We do not endorse any candidates who do not interview with us. We do not endorse in uncontested races. For questions, email matt.driscoll@thenewstribune.com.