



FOX CHAPEL DEMOCRATIC COMMITTEE 2025 JUDICIAL CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE

PART 1: INTRODUCTION

As you know, there are a large number of candidates for an unusually high number of judicial vacancies within the Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas in 2025. The Fox Chapel Democratic Committee (FCDC) believes that citizens of Fox Chapel and those of surrounding communities as well voters within Allegheny County in general would benefit from learning more about the candidates, so that their choices in upcoming elections can be as informed as possible. Therefore, FCDC has developed a Judicial Candidate Questionnaire and is asking each judicial candidate to complete and return it, so that your responses can be distributed as widely as possible.

FCDC intends to:

- Share your responses with Democratic committees of other communities in our region;
- Share your responses with the citizens of Fox Chapel and to individuals within Fox Chapel School District, and encourage other area committees to do so;
- Publish your responses on FCDC's website and seek to have them published on the Allegheny County Democratic Committee's website as well;
- Publish them on FCDC's social media pages.

PART 2: INSTRUCTIONS

Please respond to the questions on the following page and return your written responses to *foxchapedems@gmail.com* on or before **Friday, February 14, 2025**.

This form is in Word format, so responses may be typed directly under each question.

Please answer each question, including subparts, as completely as possible; however, please keep responses clear and reasonably concise so they are understandable and useful to individuals who may not have a background in law.

QUESTIONNAIRE

CANDIDATE NAME: Matthew Rudzki

DATE: February 2, 2025

1. Judicial Philosophy and Temperament

Judges make decisions in high-stakes and emotional situations. How do you stay fair and calm under pressure? Share an example from your career.

Foremost, my experience of being on the bench as a district judge for the last three years have had an immense impact on shaping my judicial temperament. The on-the-job training is the best way to hone judicial temperament. Lawyers, by their very training, are zealous advocates in an adversarial system—the exact opposite of what we expect from our judges as neutral arbiters. My collective experiences over thousands of cases in my court, sitting in for colleagues in their courts, and presiding over matters of Pittsburgh Municipal Court, including volunteering to sit for homicide preliminary hearings, have helped me develop a proven temperament that is calm, patient, respectful, courteous, and dignified.

Beyond my time as a judge, my experiences as a lawyer appearing before numerous judges led me to pick and choose traits that I saw as most effective in a jurist. Further, being a husband and father of three has been vital to shaping how I interact and react from the bench. Between my undergraduate studies and law school, I taught English at two high schools in Austria. Being a teacher and most importantly the patience and communication skills it taught me have been vital to my time on the bench and judicial temperament. Lastly, serving as a mayor for four years is akin to being a social worker and referee who must be transparent, able to clearly convey thoughts, and a manager of personalities.

All of the above, taken together, have shaped and will continue to impact my judicial temperament.

2. Commitment to Judicial Ethics

Judges must avoid conflicts of interest and undue influence. How would you handle a situation where a friend or campaign donor asks for special treatment in your courtroom?

- a. Have you had this experience, and what was your response?

I have never had a lawyer nor party request special treatment in my courtroom. Every party in my courtroom is treated exactly the same as the prior party and the next party. If this were to occur in my courtroom, I would disclose it to all parties in the matter and recuse myself from the case because I do not believe a reasonable person could overcome even the appearance of impropriety in such a situation.

- b. Did you disclose it to an ethics body or to law enforcement? Why or why not?

If an attorney were to make such a request, I would notify the Disciplinary Board. If a non-attorney were to make such a request, I would refer it to the District Attorney.

3. **Accessibility and Fairness**

- a. Judges must ensure everyone can participate in the legal process. How will you make your courtroom accessible to people without lawyers?

Accessible justice guides me on the bench and is one of the three prongs of my campaign platform. Access to the courts is foundational to our justice system. At the District Court and Common Pleas level, that means ensuring the indigent parties can proceed *in forma pauperis* in civil matters if they qualify and also granting a continuance at the first listing should an unrepresented party request an attorney and directing them to the Allegheny County Bar Association, Neighborhood Legal Services, or other pro-bono legal resource.

In a criminal matter or a situation where a jail sentence is possible, my staff or I always notify the accused of their constitutional right to an attorney and provide them with the appropriate contact information and a QR code to apply for the Allegheny County Office of the Public Defender.

Additionally, after taking the bench I became the second judge in the County to offer a night-court option for school and juvenile cases, during which we also reserve time for working folks and families to schedule landlord-tenant and traffic matters.

Finally, I am always open to the use of remote technology when individuals are not able to make it to court.

- b. Every person has conscious and/or unconscious biases. How do you recognize and suppress those biases in yourself, so that you can deal with all parties fairly and dispassionately? Give examples of how you've dealt with this issue.

As a straight, cis, white male, I fully acknowledge the privilege I have enjoyed in life. Daily, my implicit biases are challenged and I endeavor to use my privilege to uplift others. It is not a zero-sum game. Guaranteeing due process and doing justice for marginalized folks and historically underrepresented groups does not cost society anything.

Whether in my personal life or on the bench, I encounter situations or hear stories that force me to check myself and my instincts. I will always make the moral decision unless the law gets in the way, and in the words of the late Chief Justice Max Baer: "All you try to do is the right thing...and how can it be a bad job if all you try to do is the right thing all day every day?".

4. **Describe the types of cases you've tried/presided over**

List 3-5 examples of cases (anonymously) in which you've been involved as counsel or judge, and that you believe inform or enhance your ability to serve as a judge. Include why/how these experiences influenced you.

Since taking the bench, I have encountered thousands of individuals, all of whom have impacted me personally and professionally. I find that when parties appearing in court are treated with dignity and respect, the outcomes are generally positive.

I often say that weddings are the best part of the role, while granting an order of possession in a landlord-tenant case is the worst part of the role. Between these two poles, doing the least amount of harm and making the moral decision—unless the law gets in the way—helps folks maintain their dignity, keeps them on their feet, or gets them back on their feet.

I am guided on the bench by the principles of restorative, fair, and accessible justice, and these principles also guide my campaign. Regularly, defendants in criminal matters come to my court. Generally, some form of unmet mental health needs, substance use disorder, or a combination of both is the root cause of the underlying alleged criminal behavior. While I was the mayor of Sharpsburg, I advocated for an embedded social worker in the police department, and Borough Council hired a social worker after I took the bench. The Sharpsburg Police Department Social Worker and a social worker from Passages to Recovery are always in my courtroom for the criminal court session and are able to connect and follow up with defendants ordered to complete treatment. Having them present has increased our successful outcomes with folks completing treatment and their cases being withdrawn, dismissed, or reduced at the preliminary hearing.

If an individual is indigent or otherwise unable to pay, judges have the discretion to waive their fines and fees. On countless occasions, a person has come to court because their license was suspended or a warrant issued for failure to pay fines and fees. As a result, they are also at risk of losing their job, their stable housing, their children, and so much more. In these instances, I am always available to do a payment determination hearing to determine the proper course of action. If a person collects any government assistance, case law and precedent is clear that they are unable to pay and I waive their fines and fees. Many folks have reached back out to say that this helped them get their license back, their job back, and their life back. Because this became a regular occurrence, I began hosting fine and fee clinics to address the matter.

In landlord-tenant matters, many landlords as well as tenants have benefited from emergency rental assistance programs. However, much of that assistance has run dry. To supplement it, I have created a resource guide to local organizations and non-profits that provide support for housing insecurity, food insecurity, and legal aid. I provide this to all tenants at the first listing of their matter in order for them to connect to resources and hopefully resolve the landlord-tenant matter at the second listing. The result has been that the bulk of landlord-tenant cases in my court have been withdrawn or settled with all parties being restored.

Judges have many tools available to them to help individuals and I have the advantage of knowing what those tools are and how to meaningfully and effectively use them.

5. Improvements to the courts

Courts are in the business of serving the public by providing the fair, efficient and prompt administration of justice.

- a. Do you perceive shortcomings in our current court system? Please provide examples.

Access to the courts is foundational to our justice system, yet can be limited in any number of ways. Before taking the bench, one of the most frustrating aspects of practicing law was access to the courts. Whether the result of a court starting late, the docket being stacked with cases as opposed to staggered, unnecessary continuances, or limited representation for indigent defendants, among other issues, justice delayed is justice denied.

We also must acknowledge the reality of racial disparities in our justice system. As a member of the judiciary and the Allegheny County Bar Association Criminal Litigation Section, I took a special interest in the 250-page document issued by the Rand Corporation for the University of Pittsburgh Institute for Politics entitled “Creating a Path Forward to Reduce Racial Disparities in the Criminal Justice System in Allegheny County”. The study highlighted what many of us already knew: in Allegheny County, the criminal justice system disproportionately impacts the Black community in terms of arrest rates, traffic stops, incarceration rates, and average monetary bond amounts. In response to the study, I participated as a panelist addressing the study at the 2024 Allegheny County Bar Association Bench-Bar Conference, with a particular focus on how the disparities are perpetuated at the preliminary- arraignment and hearing stages.

- b. If elected, how would you go about correcting these problems? What specific steps would you take to improve the quality and delivery of results to litigants and the public?

During my time on the bench, I have always started early or on time. Punctuality is vital to all professions, especially the courts. We also stagger cases by scheduling matters over a period of time instead of all at once, which helps prevent logjams and avoidable delays. Attorneys and parties appearing before me are always pleased with the efficiency by which I regulate the docket. I have endeavored to increase accessibility to the courts by introducing a monthly night court session for juvenile cases to avoid pulling them out of school and for parties who cannot afford to take off a day of work. We also utilize remote technology—phones, Teams, and Zoom—when requested by any party. In addition, for criminal matters, defendants are always informed of their constitutional right to an attorney and provided the necessary documentation to complete the public defender application online in a matter of minutes. In civil and landlord-tenant matters, I have created a resource guide that lists local- and County-based services for food and housing insecurity, and also access to legal aid such as Neighborhood Legal Services, the Allegheny County Bar Association, and the Women’s Center & Shelter of Pittsburgh, among others. As a Common Pleas Judge, I would do everything within my power to continue the above-referenced practices to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to be heard and that their due process rights are always respected.

We can combat racial disparities in our justice system by acknowledging our own implicit biases. I addressed the issue briefly above in questions three and six. We also can ensure that court staff is well-trained on how to spot and respond to racial disparities, and the historical context to them. As such, I will ensure my staff receive the appropriate training.

6. Judicial selection process

- a. Do you believe state judges should be elected? Why/why not?

Yes. The judiciary is one of three, co-equal branches of government. The legislative and executive branches are elected by the people, and this should be no different for judges. Judges should reflect the electorate and the people they serve, and should be elected by the people at-large.

- b. If not, what system do you believe should be used instead, and why?

N/A