



2018 City Council Candidate Questions

Cory Wolbach Responses

REASON FOR RUNNING

What do you hope to achieve in the next four years on the city council?

I look forward to continuing working with my colleagues, with neighborhood leaders, and with other residents to identify and pursue policies which reduce traffic, increase affordable housing, protect our environment, and ensure that both seniors and future generations have the best opportunities Palo Alto can offer. We also must continue our efforts to improve government transparency, responsiveness, and financial responsibility.

STATE VS LOCAL CONTROL

What is your philosophy when it comes to local versus state control over growth and development mandates?

At a very high level, it is important to maintain the tug of war between different levels of government, as a means of checking and balancing. Good governance is best achieved when no single body has unlimited power. So the struggle between state and local authority is a net-positive. Absolute state preemption would be a negative, as would be absolute local control.

Palo Alto and the region, like other popular regions of the country, are struggling to coordinate and balance jobs, housing, and transportation. We erred for decades by encouraging job growth without planning for housing or transportation. Our community will benefit if we and our neighboring cities pursue greater balance. The state has a legitimate role in supporting that and encouraging that. The state should not, however, dictate to cities the specifics of HOW we pursue balance. They should set the goal and provide resources. We should be able to figure out the path to get there.

HOUSING

Given the cost of land and construction costs, how do we make it economically viable to create Below Market Rate housing for low income residents (80% of AMI or lower) in Palo Alto? (80% of AMI is \$66,150 for one person or \$75,800 for two persons.)

Last year, a couple colleagues and I researched and identified a whole range of existing zoning rules which have had the unintended consequence of make BMR (i.e. subsidized) housing, along with reasonably priced market-rate (i.e. non-subsidized) housing, less economically viable. Essentially, our existing zoning code encourages offices first, then very expensive luxury housing, then moderately priced market-rate housing, then BMR housing. We need the last two, not the first two. So my colleagues and I introduced a memo last fall calling a work plan to change zoning rules to invert the incentive structure. The rest of council joined us in moving the memo forward, and then Housing Work Plan earlier this year. We have implemented an affordable housing overlay and the zoning changes from the Workplan are under consideration by the Planning commission.

I have also voted to limit office growth and expand housing generally, to at least slow down the worsening jobs-housing imbalance which is the root cause of the unaffordability crisis.

What changes would you make to the rules allowing Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) in single-family residential neighborhoods? Should denser housing development be allowed in single-family residential neighborhoods?

As for ADUs: First, to ensure neighbors' privacy, explore front of house placement instead of rear-of house placement, and limit windows facing into back or side yards. Second, incentivize making ADUs available to low income renters, seniors, people with disabilities, and public employees (I've been pushing for this for a couple years, and am glad it's coming back to Council soon). I am open to other modifications.

As for denser housing in single-family residential neighborhoods: Generally, I am against this. However, there are likely some some places currently zoned for single-family, but where a slightly denser project would have little to no negative impact, especially for housing types with minimal traffic and parking requirements. I don't think it's appropriate to preemptively say we couldn't consider such sites. But I think our priority areas for moderately more density are (1) those areas best served by our train stations, jobs, and services (e.g. the Downtown core), and (2) areas which are currently non-residential but which are potential re-development sites (e.g. the Fry's site).

What stronger renter protections, including restrictions on evictions without "just cause" and limits on annual rental rate increases, do you support, if any?

To be clear, "limits on annual rental rate increases" is the definition of "rent stabilization," which, at least in California, is used synonymously with "rent control." (In other states, rent control may refer to a policy of capping total rent, rather than just capping the annual increase in rent, but this is not permitted under CA law, and so is not part of policy debates in CA cities.) I have not supported pushing for traditional rent stabilization (a.k.a. rent control) in Palo Alto because of its limited applicability (only applying to buildings older than 1995) and because I don't think it would survive the inevitable ballot measure challenge. What would have broader reach and find enough community support to survive an initiative challenge?

First, I have worked with renter-advocates to explore and introduce a strong renter protection policy focused on relocation assistance. Essentially, it would use the triggers traditionally associated with rent stabilization and just cause, but with a different remedy. This policy would require relocation assistance either when a tenant is evicted without just cause, or when they must move due to substantial rental increases, or when their building's use changes. We included this proposed policy in the colleagues memo I co-authored this summer.

Second, along with relocation assistance, I also support strengthening our one-year lease requirements, requiring further advanced notice about rental increases, and strengthening the effectiveness of our mediation program.

I am open to any additional ideas to support the challenges faced by renters in Palo Alto.

Do you support a law limiting loss of existing housing units? Explain.

Yes. When housing sites are redeveloped or redesigned, we should prohibit a reduction in number of units. Also, we should explore a vacancy tax and updates to our short-term-rental rules to make sure rental homes are used for regular rentals, rather than for empty investments or for unauthorized hotels.

Should Palo Alto adopt the “Palmer fix” that requires the inclusion of Below Market Rate housing in new rental housing projects? Please answer Yes or No.

Yes. Recent legislation overturned an erroneous (in my view) court case - PALMER - which prohibited inclusionary housing. Including affordable housing in market rate developments where possible leads to a more cohesive community and better quality of life for renters.

OFFICE DEVELOPMENT / USAGE

Neighborhood services, such as doctors and therapists, are being displaced by larger tech or R&D businesses (e.g., 550 Hamilton, 2600 El Camino Real, 385 Sherman). Would you make changes to zoning rules or enforcement to protect neighborhood services?

Yes. These services are important for our community, and a lot of these small-office professionals are also Palo Alto residents.

Should transportation and parking standards be modified to reflect the realities of increasing office and R&D employee densities? If so, how?

Yes. Businesses which have a higher density of workers than traditional office uses should either (a) demonstrate that they are actually implementing a transportation demand management (TDM) plan to make sure many of their employees take transit, carpool, or walk or bike to work; or (b) pay additional funds to support the city's Transportation Management Associations (TMAs), which are cost-effective mechanisms for reducing traffic and parking impact caused by commuters in job-rich areas.

QUALITY OF LIFE

What two things would you prioritize to make Palo Alto and its neighborhoods more livable?

Only two? If forced to choose, I would begin with prioritizing mobility for all, and more accessibility to our public spaces and parks.

It is important for people of all ages and ability levels to be able to safely and conveniently get around town. Whether driving, biking, walking, taking a shuttle, or riding a bus, we all need to get around. Whether going to work, school, the doctor, shopping, to a theater or sporting event, a park, or just friend's home, mobility is essential to our quality of life. Making it safe and convenient is our responsibility.

It is also important that we make our public spaces welcoming for all ages and ability levels. For instance, for many people, especially children, parents of children, and seniors, having restroom facilities is such a basic need that I am still shocked by how many of our important public spaces and neighborhood parks still lack restrooms. Also, for Palo Altans who don't drive, we should have a shuttle for visiting our open space areas: Foothills Park, Arastradero Preserve, and Baylands. Palo Altans value our parks, and we should all be able to enjoy them.

How do we balance the pressure to build housing against the limits of infrastructure, such as transportation, parks, school capacity, and the environment?

The key for me is not to balance by saying “either-or,” but to balance by saying “yes and...” For instance, in planning for the North Ventura Coordinated Area Plan (Fry's site), we should plan for how that whole area will look and function in the future. How much new park space will it have? How much housing? Where will the kids who live there go to school, and how will they get there safely? How will all generations in that area have mobility options, whether driving, biking, or walking, or taking a

shuttle, bus or train? How will this new future development minimize water and electricity use, and could it be entirely free of natural gas appliances?

These are solvable problems, but we need to ask them at the front end, rather than try to fix them after poor planning has been completed. This is part of why I am so strongly in favor of coordinated area plans, where the community can work together to pose these questions and think through how to address them for an area.

TRANSPORTATION

Should businesses be responsible for reducing traffic and parking impacts? Should the businesses pay for the remedies and how? What is the City's role?

Should businesses be responsible: Substantially yes, especially large employers.

Should businesses pay? Substantially yes. How? I suggest a system where they can pick from three options:

Option 1: Large employers can implement Transportation Demand Management (TDM) plans. With TDM plans, they provide opportunities and work with their own employees to get them out of cars. These TDM plans can be voluntary or can be required by the city as a condition of approval of a project, as part of a conditional use permit, etc.

Option 2: Instead of doing it all on their own, large employers can participate in and contribute to the Palo Alto Transportation Management Association (PATMA). In a TMA, multiple employers combine resources to achieve economy of scale to get employees in a job-center out of their solo cars. They can provide transit passes, create a bigger pool of employees for carpooling, run vanpools, encourage biking, etc. Even with limited resources, in its first couple years PATMA has already made progress reducing commuter trips in our Downtown, and it is time for PATMA to expand to more of Palo Alto. PATMA's counterpart in the Stanford Research Park is called SRPGO.

Option 3: When large employers do not effectively implement a TDM plan, nor adequately contribute to PATMA or SRPGo, then the employer should provide funds to the city to support our transportation programs. This could be implemented with an employee headcount tax.

The point is that large employers should address their traffic impact, either on their own through a TDM, collaboratively through PATMA or SRPGo, or by paying the City directly.

What is the City's role? The City should set the framework, encourage collaboration, and enforce.

Residents and commuters alike suffer relentless frustrations arising from traffic and parking. These are problems of prosperity, and not unique to Palo Alto. Other places with high jobs-housing imbalances face similar challenges. This isn't amenable to a quick or easy fix, and will require all of us to work together to make things better.

According to the latest US Census Bureau data, 88% of Palo Alto renter households have at least one car. Do you support reduced parking requirements to promote building housing? Will renters in these developments park in the surrounding neighborhood? If not, explain why not.

My own household has two people, one car, one motorcycle, and one bicycle. Essentially, we only use one parking space on a regular basis (two when family or friends come to visit from out of town). But we have four parking spaces on our property, with two in the garage and two on the driveway. That means we have four times the parking we need for most of the year. Of course, every household

is different, and, over time, one household's needs can change. For instance, in the past, our own household had more cars and more people.

Should we reduced parking requirements for rentals? Yes. Granted, for many people, it is difficult or even impossible to get back and forth to work or errands without a car. Households commonly include multiple working adults. However, in a multi-family project, the needs of different households average out. Not everybody has family visiting at the same time. Not every family has two kids in high school each driving at the same time. Anecdotal experiences, reports from affordable and senior housing providers, and studies commissioned by the City and others point the same direction. The evidence is increasingly clear: when it comes to housing zoning, we generally require more parking than needed.

To limit impacts on the neighborhood from new housing, we should (1) focus new housing in areas where parking is least needed and (2) limit new properties' residents' ability to park on the street. For example, we recently approved an apartment building at the corner of Page Mill and El Camino. It is near transit and jobs and shopping, and we made sure it was excluded from the adjacent Residential Parking Program (RPP) area. This means residents of the new apartments will not be allowed to compete for street parking in that neighborhood. This should be our model going forward: housing near transit, in RPP protected areas, but not eligible for the RPPs themselves. If developers think they can get away with reduced parking, I don't just want to trust them, but I am happy to give them a chance to prove it. This is how they can prove it.

What are your ideas for solving our traffic problems (other than using Caltrain, which is over capacity even with planned expansions)?

The two biggest causes of traffic in Palo Alto are commuters and school trips.

For commuters, my focus remains on expanding the Palo Alto Transportation Management Association (PATMA), which has already demonstrated successes in reducing commuter car trips, even with limited funding and staff. As the City Council Liaison to PATMA, I have been pushing it to expand to California Avenue area, and to include business areas between Downtown and Cal Ave, such as Palo Alto Medical Foundation, Town & Country Village, PAUSD district offices and Paly, and El Camino Real

Beyond expanding PATMA, I also propose we prepare to create a subregional federation of TMAs to work across city borders. Palo Alto has two TMAs (PATMA and SRPGo in the Stanford Research Park), Mountain View has a TMA, and Sunnyvale has two. East Palo Alto and Menlo Park would benefit from collaboration as well. Some people live in one city and work in a neighboring city. By pooling resources, we can hire adequate staff, expand successful programs, etc. Having already met with counterparts on City Councils in Mountain View and Sunnyvale, as well as Mountain View TMA leadership, I am confident there is strong interest in such collaboration.

For school trips, we need to continue to support our Safe Routes to School program. We also need to get more buses or shuttles running to carry students, not fewer. When I was a Gunn student (quite a few years ago) I rode the VTA 88 bus. And yet VTA continues to threaten to take it away. One of the best uses of the City's free shuttle is middle school students. But the status quo is inadequate. I remain committed to revamping our city shuttle with greater collaboration between the City, PAUSD, and PATMA.

GRADE SEPARATION

Describe a creative funding strategy you would employ to improve Palo Alto's grade separation options.

Implementing a grade separation plan is essential for our future to make cross-town movement safer and more reliable. It is important that we grade separate in a way which enhances neighborhoods, rather than damages them. It's important to me to help our community be more connected, not more divided. Several neighborhoods could be impacted, positively or negatively, for decades to come. We need to get this right. Funding and engineering restrictions are two of the key questions.

We have some substantial funding from Measure B (2016). Private partnerships or donations might be available as a way to contribute. State or federal grants might be sought. Large regional employers like Stanford should contribute substantially toward addressing major regional transportation projects like grade separation, and doing so would be in their interests as well as Palo Alto's. (Please see my answer to next question as well, as it builds on this.)

How should Palo Alto collaborate with other cities to coordinate options and obtain more funding for grade separations from regional, state, and Federal governments

First, we should team up with neighboring cities, the three counties, and Caltrain to explore not just funding sources, but also cost saving measures. For example, can we use steeper gradients for a potential trench or tunnel (which are still among the options we are considering)? Could we plan for an eventual elimination of diesel freight on the Caltrain corridor?

As Chair of the Council Rail Committee, I am pushing the City (and potentially neighboring cities) to formally ask Caltrain to study such questions and provide greater clarity. Doing so may substantially reduce costs or even enable grade separation options which otherwise are considered prohibitively expensive or technically infeasible.

I have initiated our city discussions with our state lobbyists to start looking into state funding options, and to support the broader discussions about the future of the Caltrain corridor. I have also begun outreach to our legislators to (re)engage them in these discussions. The challenge of separating all grade crossings along the Caltrain corridor is not just one a problem for Palo Alto, but for the entire Peninsula. Given the Peninsula's significance in the state and national economy, we can make a strong case that we need state and federal funding to keep our region moving.

CODE ENFORCEMENT

Are you satisfied with current Code Enforcement as a way of protecting neighborhood uses and quality of life? If yes, why? If not, how would you increase the effectiveness of Code Enforcement activities?

No, I am not satisfied, and the complaints I hear from residents about this are numerous. Responding to this issue, we have invested in expanding our Code Enforcement staff, and encouraged them to be more responsive and proactive.

CONFIDENCE IN GOVERNMENT

In light of the recent departure of several senior city staff members, what would you do to improve the attraction and retention of quality staff?

I see this being rooted in three problems:

1) The community and the entire region is an extremely challenging environment for any employer to recruit and retain talent, due to housing costs and poor transportation options. Some potential employees balk at coming in the first place. Some on staff leave as soon as they can. We need to keep working on those underlying problems, and, in the meantime, we may have to invest more in salaries, housing bonuses, and transportation bonuses, and find ways to do more with less. Housing and transportation have been and remain central areas of focus for me.

2) In part because of issue above, there seems to be a problem with mediocre training of mid-level management within the bureaucracy of City Hall. This means work is inefficient, there is a thin bench for upward promotions, higher level managers lack mid-level management support, and lower level staff lack competent guidance. All of this leads to stress. Many City employees are dedicated to the community but become so frustrated that they leave, or at least are looking to leave. I have heard these complaints from employees in multiple departments. I am personally committed to working with our new city manager to ensure the City does a better job with basic management within the organization. This is important to improve morale for employees and to ensure the organization can efficiently and effectively deliver quality services for our community.

3) Outside pressure from Council and the community makes Palo Alto a particularly tough community to work in. I think it is good that we have high standards. But we all (including I) need to remember that the people who work for the city are human, that they deserve our respect. Our city employees, almost without exception, are dedicated to civil service, and want to do a good job for the community. It is important for the Council to give clear direction, not change it too often, and to understand the real limits of what our staff is able to do with limited resources in a given timeframe.

How would you improve communications and collaboration with the PAUSD and School Board?

I think we have a generally good relationship, but we can do a lot more. For example, our City-School Liaison Committee, as with too many of our committees, is staff-driven, rather than member driven. Instead of tackling tough policy issues and making recommendations to the Council and PAUSD Board, the Liaison Committee serves more as an informational forum. This is a huge missed opportunity.

With so many joint interests between the City and PAUSD, we need to work more closely. First, there is the issue of what we are going to do with Cubberley. Second, the City is heavily involved in some school programs (middle school athletics, for example). We also provide school resource officers at PAUSD schools, and have needs for sharing parks, playing fields, and swimming pools.

The full PAUSD Board and the entire City Council should do joint study-sessions at least once per year. Also, the City and PAUSD staff responsible for transportation need to collaborate more closely.

The public points out that last minute and significant changes at the dais by Council members is lacking in transparency and not good public policy. Furthermore, last-minute changes do not allow for staff analysis or public input. How can we better ensure the public has a chance to review and comment on these matters?

As a legislative body, Council's responsibility is to give substantive policy direction, rather than function as a rubber stamp for staff reports. But it is also our responsibility to listen. We hear from the public prior to deliberations so that we can, as appropriate, incorporate community input into our motions. When major changes are made during a first reading of an ordinance, we should bring it back for another first reading to enable and encourage more public comment.

FINANCES

How do you plan to fund the shortfall in city's long-term pension and health benefits liability?

1. Continuing our efforts to plan for more realistic (rather than overly optimistic) PERS rates, and the accompanying city obligations.
2. Continue to invest in our 115 trust.
3. Continue to work with our employee groups to ensure our employee costs are financially sustainable - which benefits employees, the city, and residents.
4. Avoid costly and unnecessary projects such as a new publicly funded parking garage in Downtown, which will cost at least \$30M.

This is an area where I think we have good alignment among Council and with staff. Palo Alto has, over the last couple years, really made progress in starting to tackle this tough issue. Of course, we aren't alone, and we need to keep working with our counterparts in other cities and with our legislators to make sure PERS is responsible and honest, and to make sure local governments throughout our state have clarity, resources, and a path to financial security. Financial instability is bad for everyone, and working together is in everyone's interests.

During the last economic downturn, Social Services funding was cut and has still not been restored. Do you support increasing the Social Services allocation to at least prior levels adjusted for inflation?

Yes. We talk a lot about land use and its impact on community character, but, ultimately, a community is about the people. Social service investments are important for our community. How we treat the most vulnerable people in our community says a lot about our values.

ENVIRONMENT

Do you support dedicating as parkland those properties currently and long used as park space but not formally dedicated as such in order to protect from future development those spaces currently enjoyed by the public?

Yes. I also support including park space in future planning, such as at the North Ventura Coordinated Area Plan (the Fry's site). Our parks are a big part of what defines Palo Alto, and are essential to our quality of life. Palo Alto should be an example to other communities of what great urban/suburban parks and open space look like. As Palo Altans, we may debate everything, but we almost all agree on the value of parks and open space for what they provide: a place to gather, recreation, health, wildlife, and the environment.