



2020 City Council Candidate Questions

GRADE SEPARATION

Palo Alto is considering grade-separation designs with a wide range of price tags. What are your preferred solutions? How important is project cost in selecting grade-separation designs?

PAT BURT

Based on information to date, the most promising alternatives are the “partial underpasses” for Charleston, East Meadow, and Churchill. Because these were citizen initiated concepts, contrary to assertions by the consultants and city manager that no such additional alternatives were possible, their designs have not yet been as developed as the other alternatives. Particularly, the pedestrian and bike crossings need refinement. In addition, the Churchill alternative requires awaiting Caltrain’s upcoming grade separation study and new standards which begins next year.

REBECCA EISENBERG

I think that project cost is relevant, but it is impossible to evaluate actual costs without investigations into costs. In this case, the City dismissed the whole tunnel option without any research into what exactly the tunnel would have cost.

In particular, when the tunnel idea was proposed 10 years ago, officials said it could create 50 acres of land for housing and community services – which would be invaluable given our housing crisis and recent cuts to community services.

The tunnel option would unify a community currently divided in half, replacing noisy, hazardous train tracks with green parks and homes. The tunnel option also could ease our budget crisis, given the potential value of these 50 acres at a billion dollars or more – not including the increased value to neighboring homes who would benefit by no longer bordering train tracks.

I spent a while looking into the reports filed regarding all of the initial options for the grade separation, and I could not find any analysis of the financial value of the land that would be uncovered through tunneling. Nor could I find support for the belief that the tunnel would cause homes to be lost. Nowhere could I find an analysis of who exactly owns the land on which the train tracks lie, especially given that in most cases, a city still owns the land, but the train owns an easement (right to use the land), which can be diverted below ground instead.

Perhaps most frustrating was the absence of analysis of what it would take to offload the costs of undergrounding to Caltrain or regional authorities, or whether any CARES Act stimulus money could be obtained through applications (similar to how Mountain View received \$12.3 million for emergency housing). There are many unanswered questions.

Meanwhile, the tunnel option positively would transform our city for the better. Imagine Palo Alto without the ugly, noisy, pollution-y, dangerous train tracks to which too many people in our community lose their lives every year! Imagine if Stanford and Professorville/downtown, Southgate and Old Palo Alto, Ventura and Midtown, and Barron Park and South Palo Alto finally could be joined by tree-lined streets. Imagine if we did not have to worry about the consequence of closing one street, diverting traffic to another, because all streets were open?

Imagine if we actually could have 50 acres of land for housing, for free!

Given how bad all the existing options are, and how potentially amazing the option of undergrounding the train could be, I believe it does our community a huge disservice to write off this possibility without actually looking into what it could mean.

LYDIA KOU

This is a difficult question to answer as information is still being received and evaluated. More community outreach needs to occur and input received. My preferred solution would be a solution that is sustainable, reliable, and usable for over 50 years. Safety, groundwater, and climate change issues must be factored into the “costs” of all grade separation designs.

Project costs are always important, but the lowest cost option may not be acceptable given the long term effects on so many. However, we have learned that too often cost estimates are overly optimistic.

ED LAUING

Project cost is always a valid consideration in any project. But it is not the only one and not the top priority in a project like this that may exist for 100 years. Costs are amortized over that time period.

The grade separation analysis by staff and residents and the public debate over the past couple of years has been an important and valuable process for engaging the public and confirming the feasibility of various options. But I believe a costly, intensive analysis of any specific alternative should be put on hold given the state of financing for Caltrain, the two-year study that they are about to undertake, and unknown variables over the next few years due to the pandemic.

STEVEN LEE

[Answer includes both Grade Separation questions – this one and “If buying residential properties allows the City to improve a grade-separation design and/or reduce its cost, should the City acquire these properties? Or should the City only consider designs that require no property acquisitions?”]

I am not in favor of any grade separation proposals that involve the taking of entire properties. We should not be displacing families or reducing our housing stock, especially given our current housing crisis. If residents were voluntarily interested in selling their property that would be a different question, but I doubt that enough homeowners would be willing to make that sacrifice.

Grade separation will likely be one of the most expensive capital projects in our city's history. While we need to be thoughtful about the various solutions in front of us, we do need to get moving on making a decision. There are no perfect solutions and there will be tradeoffs. So we need to evaluate the options based on which ones have the most serious impacts to our most vulnerable segments of our community -- and make a decision accordingly. Assigning relative weights to each design criteria will help us eliminate some of the noise associated with each plan and focus on the options, which while imperfect, provide for the best outcome for the most people in our community over the long term. We also need to make a decision soon so that we don't miss out on funding from outside the city.

RAVEN MALONE

Grade separations are an incredibly complicated issue for our community, and we have to consider many different community concerns as we figure out solutions, such as: safety; limiting the number of homes taken and avoiding eminent domain if possible; not cutting people off from neighborhoods; cost and feasibility; aesthetics and privacy. City Council has reached too many impasses with this issue in the past, and needs to come up with a collaborative solution soon so that we don't miss funding opportunities. I am committed to listening to all of the community's concerns and working hard to collaborate with my colleagues as we come up with solutions.

GREER STONE

I believe we should temporarily delay our decision on approving grade-separation until after this pandemic ends. Currently, Caltrain's ridership is at an all-time low caused by Covid-19 and their fundraising and ongoing managerial problems continue to make Caltrain's future uncertain. Furthermore, there is far too much uncertainty given the need for Caltrain to negotiate with high-speed rail to determine whether there will be a need for 4 tracks to accommodate high-speed rail. This negotiation process is anticipated to take at least two years to complete. Because of this, we have time to delay our decision to better fully understand the needs after we emerge from these uncertain times.

Budgetary decisions, while not the only deciding factor, are critical when making costly decisions on behalf of the city's taxpayers. Unfortunately, certain grade-separation designs are too cost-prohibitive to reasonably consider such as the tunnel option. While I have not decided on grade-separations, I like the balance the hybrid option offers.

GREG TANAKA

The importance of this project is best reflected by the thoughts of residents. Before making a comprehensive decision I would continue to get the input of Palo Alto's residents.. Given the current COVID-19 pandemic, the cost of the project should be scrutinized and discussed.

CARI TEMPLETON

As a member of the XCAP, I am currently deliberating recommendations to the City Council. Costs must be feasible for an alternative to be considered. My preferred solutions minimize acquisition of private property and maximize public benefit as defined by the requirements outlined by Council, including improving public safety and minimizing environmental impact.

AJIT VARMA

This is a decision that will affect Palo Alto for the rest of our lifetimes. I want to build as much of the project through underground tunneling as possible. When this cost is amortized over the course of a hundred years, it's a very achievable goal.