



2020 City Council Candidate Questions

OFFICE DEVELOPMENT

What other ideas do you have for incentivizing housing construction over office construction?

PAT BURT

I led in the creating the annual office cap. I also supported maintaining a Downtown office cap and supported the citizen led revised office/commercial limit under the Comp Plan.

I have advocated for rezoning selected areas from "office" zoning to higher density "residential" so that housing does not compete with the higher investment returns of offices, including in designated areas of the Stanford Research Park. Affordable housing needs sites and reasonable land costs. Allow affordable housing on city-owned surface parking lots above the parking.

REBECCA EISENBERG

A couple thoughts:

Zoning Changes to Enable Housing:

1. Work towards elimination of exclusionary zoning, including unduly large minimum lot sizes, overuse of RH1 zoning, limits on height for housing (not office), and density caps -- especially in neighborhoods like Old Palo Alto where ghost houses occupy a growing percentage of homes.
2. Take action to eliminate ghost houses, e.g. through a vacancy tax. All residences should be occupied by residents.
3. End the conversion of residential lots for commercial use: e.g. Hotel President, private school Castilleja's proposed doubling in size on 55 residentially-zoned lots (including the tearing down of houses and the removal of 140 trees).
4. Work to transition all unused or underutilized lots to be residential unless public interest proves otherwise.
5. Immediately enable expedited approvals of housing development, with minimal design interference, and allowance of immaterial variance -- e.g. setback changes required in order to minimize environmental destruction, and to preserve trees. (As an attorney, along with other interest groups, I have some model expediting ordinances to propose for consideration and discussion.)
6. Enable immediate conversion of commercial to residential upon request (and subject to environmental remediation if necessary of course).
7. Place a complete moratorium on office development, except to the extent that the office development can be shown to be in the public interest.

Fiscal Changes to Enable Housing:

1. Enact business tax including on commercial developers, because Palo Alto is the only city in the state (if not country) with a material business presence that lacks any business tax ... and so that the federal and state tax incentives for housing development have at least **some** appeal to developers.
2. Raise developer fees for office development; lower developer fees for residential development in order to incentivize residential development by making it more profitable for developers.
3. Work towards full elimination of in-lieu fees.

4. Revival of Palo Alto's Office of Inspections and Enforcement, which has been almost eliminated due to budget cuts, despite the fact that it is revenue-producing. Use this office to enforce non-compliant commercial developers, e.g. near Stanford Research Park (where many large sites have sat abandoned mid-construction for years, even prior to the coronavirus) and to collect code-defined penalties when due. Use the office to bring revocation hearings for non-compliant projects that have received sufficient notice.
5. Require polluters to clean up their toxic waste -- e.g. HP Superfund Site, on the EPA list for decades, and industrial businesses located near the creek, e.g. in Ventura.
6. Reclaim private land for public use whenever possible; prioritize housing.
7. Invest in under-grounding Caltrain in order to create as much as 50 acres of public land for housing purposes.
8. To the extent that Palo Alto's current primary method of housing creation is continued — a method with a proven record of failure — then at very least, housing mandates tied to commercial development must also include the following: (a) double in size from 15%; (b) must specify that low-income housing must be the majority of housing created (right now the only recent project with this mandate is delivering only below-market rate 'homes' and these are approx 400-500 square feet in size); (c) mandate size minimums for affordable housing.
9. Explore bond measures, ideally linked to commercial rather than residential. Bond measures that attach to residential real estate taxes deepen Prop 13's regressive impact.
10. Dive deep into partnerships with nonprofits and similar housing organizations. There is a lot of opportunity and funding available! Dignity Moves and LifeMoves are my favorites, but there are many fantastic nonprofits ready and eager to help Palo Alto.
11. Take advantage of state funding that is being offered through the CARES program; there have been hundreds of millions of dollars available for housing, some of which Palo Alto may qualify for. We should explore those options as much as possible.

WHY has our city council not dropped everything to do this work? I promise I will work day and night to solve this problem. We must start!

LYDIA KOU

Place a moratorium of any NEW office construction and increase inclusionary rental units by providing certain types of subsidies.

ED LAUING

At PTC we recommended a housing program, now passed by Council, called the Housing Incentive Program (HIP) that I worked on diligently and ultimately supported. This relaxed some building requirements to incentivize housing development.

PTC also just recommended the extension of housing into the CS zone on San Antonio – coupled with additional city scrutiny of the transportation corridor there. There is now a project in application there for >100 units with 15% of them below market rate.

These changes will get us more housing, but as I noted on the PTC, they are not perfect solutions. As we consider denser and mixed-use housing projects, and especially in locations that lack infrastructure designed to support it, we take on significant risks of long-term community impacts. In tandem we must also ramp up enforcement of mitigation commitments and invest in infrastructure improvements.

STEVEN LEE

We need to update our zoning laws to prohibit, limit or disincentivize office construction. My sense is that if we are serious about digging ourselves out of our 3-1 jobs to housing imbalance, we shouldn't be allowing or incentivizing any more office construction. But as the question acknowledges, we can't just stop there. We need to incentivize housing construction by removing barriers to building dense housing along transit corridors and near jobs by re-evaluating height limits, parking requirements and providing a more predictable and reliable approval process.

RAVEN MALONE

We should encourage more housing development by reducing excessive parking requirements and raising density limits. Parking requirements are too high and not flexible enough for residential development — but too flexible for commercial development. These requirements make housing harder and more expensive to build. We should be encouraging less driving and more walking and biking. Density limits mean housing downtown like the President Hotel can't be built today. We need more housing like what the President Hotel was before a developer evicted all the residents.

GREER STONE

To incentivize developers to build housing over office we need to change our city's policies to make it more profitable to build housing. Ways in which I would do this is not only by strengthening our city's office cap, but also by increasing the impact fees commercial developers must pay, and have developers of large commercial properties pay to fully mitigate their impacts.

GREG TANAKA

One of the best approaches to addressing construction in Palo Alto is to hear the concerns of the people of the city. By encouraging discussion we can ensure that action is balanced with resident concerns. That is the standard for Palo Alto's elected officials and I will continue to encourage residents to be vocal about their concerns.

CARI TEMPLETON

When elected, I will promote development of housing through both construction and conversion approaches. Converting existing office locations to housing will simultaneously increase the capacity for housing and reduce the capacity for office construction.

AJIT VARMA

Both housing and office construction are critical needs for our city and would encourage both.