



2020 City Council Candidate Questions

Greer Stone Responses

EXPERIENCE

What experience with Palo Alto community issues would you bring to the council?

I have been intricately involved in Palo Alto City government for nearly a decade. Today, I chair the Midtown Residents Association, the city's largest resident's association. I currently represent Palo Alto on the Santa Clara County Human Rights Commission as the vice-chair. Previously, I served as the chair of the Palo Alto Human Relations Commission. I am also a Block Preparedness Coordinator for my neighborhood. I frequently advocate for positions on behalf of our community in front of City Council. Most recently, I wrote a letter to City Council urging them to take immediate action by demanding greater public participation in the Plan Bay Area 2050 and Final Regional Housing Need Determination. I raised concern that the determination was made without public participation, lack of transparency, and without taking into consideration the uncertainty in job and housing demand in a post-Covid-19 world. We still do not know the full allocation here in Palo Alto. I have also spoken in front of Council numerous times before. I objected to the loss of housing at the President's Hotel, the approval of the Audi dealership in the Baylands, and against the removal of the Downtown Office Cap.

GOALS

What are the top three goals you want to achieve in the next four years on the city council?

My top three priorities would be 1) helping the Palo Alto economy recover, 2) affordable housing production, and 3) creating a closer government-community partnership.

PUBLIC SAFETY

How would you help set policies for PAPD to address racial profiling and use of excessive force?

As a council member, I will always lead and make decisions from the same social justice lens I have been using for the last 8 years as a Human Rights and Human Relations Commissioner and teacher. And I would make the following proposed changes to our police department.

First, we must enact the 8 Can't Wait reforms not already implemented.

Second, revise our hiring policies to recruit officers with no misconduct allegations.

Third, promote the hiring of more women and minorities. Studies show that when there are more women in police departments the rate of police misconduct, violence, and shootings, precipitously drops.

Fourth, ensure greater transparency and accountability. A well-functioning democracy has to be transparent to be accountable to the public. Law enforcement is no exception.

Fifth, require an independent auditor's reporting of officer complaints rather than the city's own Human Resources Department.

Sixth, require that the police auditor report directly to the city council and have that report be made public within a reasonable timeframe.

And seventh, reimagine community policing by having mental health professionals respond to noncriminal matters.

What are your thoughts on “defunding” and/or reorganizing the police department? What changes do you want to see in our police department? If you would cut its budget, where would you apply the savings?

I am in favor of reallocating, not defunding. There are examples of best practices from around the country including Southern California’s PERT Program and Eugene, Oregon’s CAHOOT program, where local police and community services collaborate to offer the proper service to 911 calls. When people call 911 a dispatcher triages the call and determines if the call requires a police response because it involves a legal matter or is an issue involving violence or threatening of property. However, if the call involves issues that have a heavy mental or behavioral health component, the 911 dispatcher will redirect the call to a social worker who is trained to deescalate and help provide the person the help they need. Not only has this led to a significant decrease in police shootings and incidents of police violence in Eugene, but it is estimated to save the city \$15 million a year. Not only is this reform effective in reducing police violence, but it is also cost-effective. By reallocating funds from our city budget, we will be able to save money and then reinvest that money into essential public safety services such as reestablishing the police department’s traffic team that was cut due to the city’s budget cuts. Traffic enforcement is one of our police department’s primary responsibilities and is a key tool in helping keep our streets safe.

CITY GOVERNANCE

Do you agree with how the City recently cut its budget? If not, what would you have done differently?

Budget cuts, while necessary, must prioritize people and the services we rely on over investments in infrastructure that can be postponed or even reevaluated in the context of a new future. I was in shock this Spring when City Council was considering cutting essential city services like public safety, libraries, senior and teen services while increasing rather than reducing capital investments.

My priorities for a balanced budget will focus on areas that can be temporarily suspended without long-term consequences for our city, such as suspending paying down city pensions, freezing new hires and salary increases, and by rethinking how we typically conduct business by relying less on expensive outside consultants and utilizing the natural talents our community offers.

What is your position on Proposition 15, the constitutional amendment to require commercial and industrial properties to be taxed based on their market value, rather than their purchase price?

I am in favor.

Would you make any changes to the balance of power between the city manager and staff and the elected City Council entrusted to do the will of the people?

The City’s organizational chart clearly shows that the residents are at the top, followed by the City Council, and then the City Manager, including the other City Appointed Officers. However, too often it feels that the order is reversed and it is city staff and the City Manager directing city decisions. I have watched far too many council meetings where council will capitulate and defer to city staff, even when it is contrary to the will of the residents. As a councilmember, I will always put the will of the voters first, and ensure that city staff works for us, not the other way around.

Palo Alto has a wealth of talent and knowledge in its residents, but often hires consultants with little expert knowledge of the city. Should the city utilize the talent and knowledge of its residents differently, and if so, how?

Absolutely. One of my top priorities is promoting a closer government-community partnership. We should embrace that energy and find ways to include our incredibly talented populace in decision making. We pay millions on consultants on issues residents may be just as versed in and willing to do as volunteers. Community committees composed of actual Palo Altans, who are impacted by these decisions, can be much more beneficial than a paid consultant who knows nothing about our city. A great example of this can be seen in the NVCAP process. The city consultants have cost our city thousands and their proposals for the NVCAP will only

worsen our city's jobs-housing imbalance and adds an insufficient amount of affordable housing. However, our residents have submitted their plan called Alternative M that would create 400 affordable units and 770 other housing units through office phase-out and focused zoning.

HOUSING

RHNA states that Palo Alto's greatest housing need is for units affordable by those earning 80% and below Area Median Income. Do you support this goal and, if so, how would you accomplish it?

Yes, I do support this goal. There is no question Palo Alto needs more housing, but since 2015, only 555 new housing permits have been issued, the vast majority of which is luxury housing. In 2018, Palo Alto met only 6% of its "very low-income" Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA) requirements, and yet city leadership continues to talk about adding more luxury housing, despite meeting our market-rate goals, at the expense of low-income and very low-income housing. Palo Alto should embrace our city's Comprehensive Plan of creating 3,545-4,420 new housing units by 2030, and directly target production to our RHNA numbers, which requires 60% of those new housing units be low-income housing.

The three key steps to our housing strategy should be: 1) rebalance the jobs-housing ratio, 2) preserve existing affordable housing, and 3) invest in affordable (BMR) housing.

The first step, rebalance the jobs-housing ratio, simply means we must stop making our jobs-housing ratio worse. There's no question our astronomical housing costs are directly connected to our jobs-housing ratio, one of the worst in the nation. When cities add more jobs than housing, the price of housing increases. For example, Palo Alto added nearly 14 jobs per new housing unit between 2011-2014, and during that same period rents increased by 33%. Palo Alto must aim for jobs-housing parity. Office space leases for approximately \$12 per square foot, where luxury housing only rents for \$4 per square foot, and affordable housing is far less. If we leave it to the market, the market will seek the greatest profit: office space. Instead, we must limit office space, increase the impact fees developers must pay, and have developers of large commercial properties pay to fully mitigate their impacts.

The second step is to preserve existing affordable housing. Within my first 6 months, I will submit a colleague's memo advocating for Palo Alto to adopt a "no net loss" policy. This policy would prohibit the destruction of housing if it is not going to replace that housing with an equal or greater amount of housing. It would also prohibit the destruction of below-market-rate housing unless the current residents are guaranteed a right of first refusal on the newly built units, rental assistance during their time of displacement, and a guarantee that the newly built units will be offered to them at the same rental price or less. The most affordable housing we have is in our existing housing stock, and we must preserve it. Had this policy existed, we never would have lost the affordable housing and vibrant community at the Presidents Hotel.

Finally, we must invest directly in affordable housing, and not rely on the market to create housing through a trickle-down model that has not delivered sufficient affordability. We need to create opportunities for our teachers, first responders, nurses, and others who serve our community so that they can continue to live in the same city they serve. To create this housing, we must expand our income sources and diversify our portfolio. [See my answer to the next question for how I would propose raising funds to pay for below-market-rate housing in Palo Alto.]

PAN has officially endorsed Alternative M, which was brought to the NVCAP working group by several PAN members. What innovative ways might you explore to pay for low income housing and BMR housing in North Ventura and other sites in Palo Alto?

To pay for the much-needed affordable housing in North Ventura and across the city, Palo Alto must expand its income base by exploring alternative income sources such as a business tax. Businesses should pay their fair share through a business tax for the imbalance in jobs-to-housing that has allowed corporations to thrive at the expense of our community. Of course, this business tax should not be implemented until after our economy recovers and would not be applied to the many small businesses that serve our community.

We should also explore other tax sources being used across the country such as a speculation tax, and a vacancy tax to prevent Palo Alto homes being used as merely an investment tool. We should consider the viability of building housing in the Stanford Research Park. We must boost our impact fees on new commercial development, and increase our inclusionary zoning.

Also, I advocate for out-of-the-box thinking when it comes to new affordable housing. An example is Community Land Trusts (CLTs) as an innovative model being used across the world to create permanently affordable housing that allows the community to remain in control of the land that is held in a trust, often by a nonprofit organization. Examples of these working can be seen in cities around the globe who are challenging the status quo and creating innovative solutions to their housing problems.

What would you do to protect existing rental housing and its tenants?

As a renter, this is an issue that my wife and I are all too familiar with. We are both teachers and rent a small 1-bedroom apartment in Midtown. We live with constant concern that the next rent increase could force us out of our home, especially given inadequate protections for renters.

I would immediately propose for the City Council to enact the Palmer fix to require a percentage of rental units to be reserved for low-income earners. This policy was in place in Palo Alto for many years with great success. City Council has had the ability for the last two years to enact this policy fix, but they have failed to act. This would be one of my top priorities.

Also, I would join some of my council colleagues in drafting a colleague's memo to study additional renter protections to help support the 45% of Palo Altans who are renters. Vice Mayor DuBois and Councilmember Kou authored such a memo in 2018 but were unable to gain a sufficient majority to study the issue. I would join them in bringing this issue back to council.

Do you support ending single-family residential (R-1) zoning? Why or why not?

I would support not further expanding single-family zoning, but I would not support ending existing single-family zoning. I believe the feel and character of a city should be determined by the residents. This way people can choose the type of community and neighborhood they want to live in. There are few decisions as personal and important as where a person wants to live. I believe in local control and a city's right to determine what zoning best suits their community's character. I also find it fundamentally unfair to rescind R-1 zoning on homeowners who may have purchased their homes with the expectation that they were purchasing a home in a single-family neighborhood.

OFFICE DEVELOPMENT

Would you as a councilmember encourage more working at home to reduce commuting, traffic, pollution, and climate change? If so, what specific steps would you take?

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a horrific tragedy, but shelter-in-place has revealed the potential of commuteless work. During a 7-week span at the height of shelter-in-place, greenhouse gas emissions in the Bay Area were reduced by 32% and traffic accidents decreased by 63%. The County of Santa Clara, in conjunction with local jurisdictions, is exploring policies to promote greater telecommuting after this pandemic has ended. Palo Alto should also consider exploring policies to promote and encourage telecommuting, so we can begin switching from a commuter town plagued with traffic congestion to a resident-focused community. Not only will this reduce traffic, but all the woes it brings with it: parking demand, congested streets, and unhealthy air quality. And it could feasibly free up office space for additional housing production.

Regarding the Jobs/Housing Imbalance, how much, where and what kind of new office space can Palo Alto sustain? Should Palo Alto consider rezoning office properties to reduce the amount of future office development?

Palo Alto's jobs-housing imbalance is nothing new. For decades now, Palo Alto has encouraged greater job growth than housing production and the impact of these policies is showing today through some of the most expensive housing in the nation. In response to this imbalance, Palo Alto has instituted various office caps to slow the growth in office, but City Council has weakened these office caps in the last few years.

For example, in 2019, City Council voted to remove the Downtown Office Cap that had previously set a limit of 350,000 square feet of non-residential space in the downtown area. At the time of the repeal, only 18,000 square feet were remaining in the cap. I spoke out at the City Council meeting against the repeal, as well as so many of my neighbors, but City Council decided to ignore the will of the residents and voted in favor of repealing the office cap, despite the Council's own stated goal of creating more housing.

If I am elected, I would work towards strengthening our city's office cap. Currently, there is a citywide cap of 850,000 square feet of non-residential development by 2030 and an annual office cap of 50,000 square feet for downtown, California Avenue, and El Camino, but that square footage carries over if unused. Thus, if there is no office development one year, the next year the city could see 100,000 square feet of office constructed in one of those three areas. I would vote to end that carry over provision and further, restrict the growth of office city-wide. We cannot get serious with our housing production if we continue to allow developers to build office space, because office space is far more lucrative for the developer than housing.

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

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.

TRANSPORTATION/TRAFFIC

What do you see as our most serious traffic issues and how would you fix them?

Traffic consistently ranks as the number one issue for most Palo Altans but every year our traffic increases. Our city's congestion is nothing new, but it has continued to worsen as large-scale office buildings are approved; bringing in thousands of new drivers every day. And if we do not decide on grade-crossing separations soon, our city will see unprecedented gridlock.

Palo Alto has an ambitious goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions to 80% of 1990 levels by 2030. Transportation makes up 60% of all Palo Alto's greenhouse gas emissions. We will not be able to meet that goal if we are not able to reduce the dependency on single-occupancy vehicles commuting into our city every day. I am so honored to have received the endorsement of the Sierra Club, and I believe my policies will help not only relieve traffic congestion but also make meaningful strides towards our climate goals.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a horrific tragedy, but shelter-in-place has revealed the potential of commuterless work. The County of Santa Clara, in conjunction with local jurisdictions, is exploring policies to promote greater telecommuting after this pandemic has ended. Palo Alto should also consider exploring policies to promote and encourage telecommuting, so we can begin switching from a commuter town plagued with traffic congestion to a resident-focused community. Not only will this reduce traffic, but all the woes it brings with it: parking demand, congested streets, and unhealthy air quality. And it could feasibly free up office space for additional housing production.

We can, and must, have a city that recognizes that people use cars in the Bay Area, but also construct new bike lanes and walking paths to strongly encourage alternatives to single-occupancy vehicles. We must invest in more public transportation. Partner with local jurisdictions to expand public transportation, and collaborate with the school district to provide shuttles to schools, and promote different forms of travel such as ride-sharing apps, or encouraging employees to carpool to work.

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?

No new developments in Palo Alto should be approved without an aggressive Traffic Demand Management plan in place. Currently, Palo Alto's TDM policies lack actual enforcement, and developers have been allowed to make empty promises without fear of reprisal.

My proposal would condition new development on the developer's ability to create a traffic plan that will reduce the impact of anticipated traffic by 30 percent. The developer would then have to come back to council within a year after the project is completed to prove their plan has worked. Any amount of traffic impact over 30 percent would be assessed a penalty. The fees collected by the city for non-compliance could be invested in citywide traffic decongestion projects, such as additional bike paths and pedestrian routes.

What changes, if any, would you make to our city's parking requirements and residential parking programs?

Palo Alto's Comprehensive Plan states that we should, "promote commerce but not at the expense of residential neighborhoods." However, many of our city's parking policies have focused on promoting commerce at the expense of our neighborhoods. Not only does this frustrate our residents, but it also inhibits our city's ambitious goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions to 80% of 1990 levels by 2030. By encouraging more single-occupancy vehicles into our community by offering them additional parking in our neighborhoods, we are making it more difficult for us to achieve that goal, especially considering that 60% of Palo Alto's greenhouse gas emissions are caused by transportation.

If elected I would work towards honoring the city's original plan for our RPP program and reduce our non-residential permits to zero through a 5-year phase-out of non-residential permits. Also, I would eliminate the sale of non-residential permits in neighborhoods near California Avenue once the new parking garage is constructed. We should also increase the price of non-residential permits near Downtown so that they are more expensive than the permits inside city garages to discourage commuters from parking on residential streets.

COMMUNITY LIFE

How would you improve our city services and how would these improvements be funded?

The best way to improve our city services and continue to fund the essential city services we rely on as residents are to prioritize city services in our budget. I was disturbed in the Spring when City Council was considering cutting essential services before suspending unnecessary capital improvement projects. I believe we must always place people first. Protecting and promoting greater city services will be one of my top priorities.

How would you improve the city's code enforcement department?

I would propose forming a Code Enforcement Commission. This commission will have the power to investigate and enforce violations of our city code, and recommend more effective ways of reducing the number of repeated code violations, something not sufficiently done for years. Similar commissions exist in Atlanta and Pasadena. Let's learn from other cities' best practices. When the economy improves, I would also ensure our code enforcement department has an adequate number of employees to properly enforce city laws.

What should the City do with its 8 acres of Cubberley?

The city's ownership of Cubberley should be reserved as a community center for our city. As chair of the Midtown Residents Association, I have always been frustrated by the lack of city services and amenities in South Palo Alto. Palo Alto does not have a true community center, at least compared to what many other cities of comparable sizes have. It would be a shame to not redevelop Cubberley into a modern community center that could include a space for all ages to enjoy community activities, meeting rooms, senior services, and provide space for non-profit organizations to operate out of at reduced rates.

Many organizations are having a difficult time recruiting volunteers, including many Palo Alto commissions. What would you do as a council member to encourage more people to participate in city government and civic organizations?

I strongly believe that people are more willing to participate in local government if they feel their voices are going to be heard and if their opinions are respected and incorporated into city decisions. I would work to ensure there is more community engagement in city decisions, especially those decisions that impact the lives of residents. I have encouraged several community members to apply for city commissions and boards, and far too often I have been told no because they lack faith in city government to follow the will of the people. This must change. Also, I would ensure that our commissioners and board members are properly honored for their work, and parents with young children, I would work to offer child care services so that they don't have to make the tradeoff between serving their community and caring for their children.

Neighbors who were following the two supermarkets, first at Edgewood Plaza and then at College Terrace were dismayed that the City did not enforce the promises made by developers to provide for a grocery store. The City then did not fully collect the penalties that were due the City when the developers failed to provide the grocery stores. How the City should handle such matters?

These are problems far too familiar to Palo Altans. Often promises of community benefits are made by developers to qualify for a project, and after the project has been approved and constructed, the developer defaults on their promise. Instead of taking the developer to court to enforce the contractual agreement, the city capitulates and the developer gets away with a slap on the wrist. When we continue to allow promises and contracts to be broken with no real consequences, it sets a dangerous precedent to others who seek to take advantage of our city. I will not capitulate and I will not allow developers to renege on their promises without fully collecting on penalties, or taking them to court to recuperate the lost value to the city and our residents.

Given that some neighborhoods are closer to the train stations and to services than others, how would you balance the recommendation by housing agencies to concentrate growth in those areas with the livability of those neighborhoods?

Increased housing development near transit centers makes sense for a variety of reasons, but it should not be the only location in the city where new housing should be built. Housing should and must be dispersed around the city to better mitigate impacts on traffic, city services, schools, and other consequences of new development.

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?

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.

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 uncomfortable with eminent domain, but do believe there are situations where the city should acquire private property when it would not involve a full taking of the private property and/or when the homeowner is willing to sell their property. The city should avoid this and pursue options that would require no property acquisitions, but there are some limited circumstances where it may be necessary to acquire private property to provide substantial benefits to the community as a whole for a project that will be with our city for decades to come.

LOCAL ECONOMY

As economic impacts from the pandemic increase, what are your ideas to help local small businesses, especially those that serve neighborhoods, to survive and thrive?

I will bolster the Palo Alto Small Business Relief Fund and the Small Business Recovery Grant Program so that struggling businesses, some of which have served our community for decades, stay in Palo Alto. Let's be clear, we can't save all businesses; I wish we could, but we can do more to help those struggling during this pandemic. We must also invest in our business community and provide them the tools they need to be successful here. I would promote the hiring of an Economic Development Manager who is experienced in bringing new businesses to town that complement existing businesses to attract new people and shoppers into our retail core. This person can also recommend programs, events, and incentives to support and attract retail services that create an experience for shoppers. This will be especially important as we look to recover from the pandemic's effects. Palo Alto is one of the only cities in the Bay Area that does not have such a critical position.