



2020 City Council Candidate Questions

Ajit Varma Responses

EXPERIENCE

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

In these unique times, we need a Palo Alto city council that has a diverse set of skills to solve the new problems we are faced with. We need people who have a background and connections in different fields that have a different perspective. I bring that to the Palo Alto City Council. I love our city and want to ensure we are the best city to live in for us and our children. If we stand still we will get surpassed by other cities. I have extensive experience in technology and working with small businesses. I've led product and engineering teams that have built some of the leading products at leading companies including Google, Square, Facebook and WhatsApp. I'm an engineer by background and am trained to find new solutions. We have many people on city council with experience in thinking the same way and we need to help them with someone who brings new ideas.

GOALS

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

1. Making sure that Palo Alto is the best place for opportunity. I am dedicated to helping our city recover from COVID and helping bring back businesses and employers. I want to make sure we are the best place where you can start from anywhere and achieve all your dreams to make the world a better place. I want our children to have the best education and resources. Some of the most innovative companies today like Google, Facebook and Tesla all have origins of their success in Palo Alto. I'll make sure the next set of companies originate here also. I want to increase all of our happiness, health, wealth and impact.
2. Smart growth. Our current policies stifle growth and the future of Palo Alto. This is impacting our role in the world because people don't want to live here because the high cost of living isn't commensurate with the benefits of living here anymore. We have a lot of areas such as along 101, San Antonio Road, Page Mill and El Camino Real where we can build denser office and housing to ensure we provide the infrastructure to support our city and lower our cost of living. We need to build and support more cultural amenities and events. We need to foster and grow our unique cultural and beliefs which includes significant investment in support for the best education and resources for children.
3. Diversity of ideas. I think it's important we bring new ways of thinking with new ideas and backgrounds to city council in order to solve the problems we haven't been able to solve for the last decade in Palo Alto.

PUBLIC SAFETY

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

We need to better train police and residents. Public safety is an important need in any city and our high levels of safety make Palo Alto one of the best places to live. We need to ensure we are safe in the future and police play an important role in our city if they are trained properly. I think it's important for our police force to demilitarize and institute 8 can't wait. This means that they are trained in techniques to use non-violent means and have an attitude of helping Palo Alto's citizens and keeping them all safe. We also need to train our residents to use appropriate resources depending on the situation. This means using more community resources and fellow neighbors to deal with minor issues. We can also institute technology to deter crime through a network of video cameras that aid police in non-physical ways of keeping all of us protected.

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?

We need to ensure everyone in Palo Alto is safe and we have a low crime rate. I think the key to this is proper training and using money in the most effective ways to do that.

CITY GOVERNANCE

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

I don't think cutting the budget is the right approach. We should invest all our effort in generating more revenue through encouraging more businesses and residents to come to Palo Alto. This will not only cover current needs but also expand the benefits and improvements that we provide within our city.

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 think properties should be taxed on their market value so that all businesses are treated equally, and preferential treatment isn't provided just because someone has owned a property longer (often by large and wealthy companies). Prop 15 also doesn't phase in for quite some time which will give businesses more than enough time to recover but if we need more time I would be in favor of delaying enforcement.

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?

City Council needs to be more involved in decisions instead of abdicating their responsibilities. The people are entrusting the City Council to implement their will and it's critical their wishes are delivered upon.

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?

Of course, we have a very active and intelligent city and we shouldn't dismiss their views so quickly like we do today.

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?

I support building denser buildings in supportable areas like along 101, San Antonio Road, El Camino Real and Page Mill Road. I believe in building market rate and below market rate housing.

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?

It's pretty simple without something innovative! We just need to make the economics work for developers. I would provide strong incentives by allowing denser market rate units and office space in return for building low income housing and BMR housing.

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

I support protecting tenants who get displaced by requiring proper compensation to find a new place.

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

I do not support ending R-1 zoning. Residential neighborhoods are critical to Palo Alto and having yards and low-density areas are key to making Palo Alto a great place to live for all people. We have more than enough space in areas that are underdeveloped where we can build much denser housing and office space that can accommodate all our needs well into the future without changing the character of our neighborhoods.

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?

I would encourage biking and walking to work along with building mixed use buildings where people can live and work in close proximity.

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?

I think jobs, businesses and offices are critical to Palo Alto. I would encourage building more office space and bringing more jobs and opportunities to the area. We can work with future office developments to be mixed use and include housing aspects to the development so that people can live and work in close proximity to each other.

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

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

TRANSPORTATION/TRAFFIC

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

We need more safety for cyclists by fixing the intersections that have been identified as dangerous and building better bike routes.

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?

Yes, businesses pay taxes and should help the city mitigate the parking impact. Parking can be remedied by contributing to programs to build parking structures their employees and customers use. I think for traffic we should encourage mixed use buildings so people can live in close proximity to where they work.

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

I think our current programs are sufficient and as more density is built, developers should be required to provide commensurate parking for their needs.

COMMUNITY LIFE

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

I think we can provide more cultural and recreational activities along with events to increase the enjoyment of living in Palo Alto. These improvements can be funded by increasing tax revenues by encouraging more businesses and development in Palo Alto.

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

I don't think we need to rigorously enforce codes unless the city receives complaints. We need to be more lenient and have less restrictions.

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

I love the proposals outlined at <https://www.newcubberley.com/> which came through significant thought, discussion and outside consultation. This is an important space we should invest in developing and modernizing to provide a "new green space in addition to space for all the existing uses (gyms, Friends of the Palo Alto library, martial arts, performing and studio arts, language classes, etc.) and new activities such as a cafe, pickleball courts, a wood workshop, media center, art classrooms, gallery, skate spot, biking and walking track, culinary kitchen, playground, and two swimming pools."

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?

We need to make it worth people's time to volunteer on these commissions. Currently it's a lot of work with not a lot of ability to have the impact volunteers seek.

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?

For both of these projects it was clear that developers tried to achieve the city asks but were unable to. The city shouldn't blindly keep trying to make something happen that doesn't work and needs to work to come up with alternative plans that are beneficial to the city but actually feasible.

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?

I don't think these strict rules are the right recommendations for Palo Alto. Some areas close to train stations are great for development but others are not. We also have many areas in Palo Alto that are close to busy streets and are great for development that are not near train stations. We need to intelligently grow into the areas that make the most sense for Palo Alto.

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?

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.

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?

It's likely that all options will require some acquisition of properties (even if temporarily for shoofly tracks) but some designs require much lower property acquisitions and those are the options that should be prioritized.

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?

We need to make it very easy for small business to recover and this is the reason I'm running for City Council.

Things I would do to encourage recovery:

1. Permanent implementation of street closures during evenings and weekends on University and California avenue.
2. Removal of restrictive ordinances, building codes and fees that prevent small business from being setup.
3. The planning process should be accessible and fast with clear follow ups and timetables for when the city has to respond to questions and requests. Things should be resolved in weeks not decades!!
4. Ability to grandfather in proposals to the fees and codes for when the proposal was submitted if lower or preferred.
5. More permissible of denser development in key development areas (within height restrictions) along with ability to do market rate development.
6. Working with businesses to encourage biking and public transportation in addition to completion of planning parking garages and improvements.