



2018 City Council Candidate Questions

Alison Cormack Responses

REASON FOR RUNNING

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

- Focus on getting our big projects accomplished (train crossings plan, police station, Cubberley, bike bridge, traffic mitigation, etc.)
- Help the community agree on affordable housing goals and objectives, then encourage those to be translated into projects
- Maintain fiscal responsibility with the operating and capital budgets

STATE VS LOCAL CONTROL

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

Traditionally local control has been the mantra for cities, but there will be times we need to strike a balance between state and local rules. For example, given the significant demand for housing throughout our region, it's understandable that the state is interested in addressing the situation comprehensively.

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.)

The affordable housing overlay is a good first step and should help Palo Alto Housing make the financing work for their proposed project on Wilton.

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?

Since we recently established the rules for ADUs and are seeing permits pulled now, I would like to see how those play out and then evaluate what changes, if any, might be appropriate. Our single-family neighborhoods are integral to the fabric and character of many parts of our city.

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

As always, I want to understand what is the problem we are trying to solve, so I would want more information before deciding to implement any of these suggestions. Some of the data that would be useful: how many evictions have there been in Palo Alto in the past five to ten years, what is the

range of rents currently paid and what is the median for a few sizes of units/homes, what is the turnover rate in our rental market during a year, how much of our rental stock is single family homes, how many rental units are in what sizes of buildings (e.g., duplexes, 3-9, 10-20, etc.), do we have income ranges for tenants, etc. In general, my belief is that with the strong demand for apartments in Palo Alto, local government should focus on adding supply, which these proposals do not accomplish.

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

This is a complicated legal issue. What the city can do is create incentives to maintain the same number of units on a lot, but this is quite difficult to mandate.

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. (Note that I believe the Palmer fix allows for inclusion, rather than requires it.)

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?

I would be open to ensuring that medical professionals continue to be able to serve the people who live here. However, the city has struggled to mandate successful businesses in specified locations (e.g., supermarkets and ground floor retail), so any such proposal would need to be carefully crafted.

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

Before we modify the standards, let's get some data about how many employees are in which spaces. This should be part of the new business registry program that will hopefully supplant the inadequate program we have at the moment.

QUALITY OF LIFE

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

- Create a robust shuttle system that provides transportation for people of all ages and abilities, thereby reducing traffic and parking problems along with greenhouse gases
- Rebuild the Cubberley Community Center to provide great spaces for non-profits, artists, dancers, singers, mental health professionals, athletes, seniors, kids, life long learners, and more.

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

Thoughtfully. For example, workforce housing in the Stanford Research Park area, coupled with a TDM program, might limit the impact on traffic and the environment. Coordinating that with the work nearby on the Fry's site in North Ventura could address the impact on parks and schools.

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?

Businesses bear some responsibility, as do the people who live here, so it's reasonable to expect both businesses and Palo Altans to participate in mitigating the effects of traffic and parking. The city's role is to identify the problems and help craft solutions.

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.

In the spirit of innovation, I support trying this type of housing, as we are at Page Mill and El Camino. This approach has worked elsewhere, but we should evaluate the parking situation before and after the building so that we can assess the results and then decide whether or not to allow similar developments in the future.

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

A robust shuttle system that provides transportation for people of all ages and abilities. Since the bicycle boulevard construction on Ross Road, I have had many conversations with neighbors and others about what we could do that would get more people out of their cars, especially with our aging population.

GRADE SEPARATION

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

Funding this significant project will likely require multiple sources, including county funds, a possible business tax, perhaps a bond paid for by property owners, and potentially state and/or federal funds. Creativity should be used to show the traffic and safety problems if we do not change the train crossings so that people can understand the need for change and participate in selecting solutions.

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

By working closely with our elected officials at the county, state, and federal levels. A working committee of elected officials and staff would be a useful place to start.

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?

Yes. The recent audit indicated this is not a widespread problem and I am aware of only a few instances that were issues in recent years.

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?

Some of the departures were expected retirements and in most of those cases we have a capable interim person while the city conducts recruitment. Hopefully the current and future city managers are taking any learnings from exit interviews and incorporating that into their plans. The private sector has the Great Place to Work program and the federal government has the Best Place to work program. The city could consider establishing a similar program with other local governments, or at least learning from the other programs what makes employees feel more valued, in order to attract and retain excellent people.

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

The city/school liaison meeting, which I have regularly attended for the past year and a half, is insufficient to connect these two entities. The staff of both organizations must be better connected, perhaps with identified liaisons, not just people who work on individual projects. The liaisons could meet frequently, perhaps even weekly, to review decisions and projects.

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?

One option is for council members to vote no on amendments that include significant changes to the agenda item and the staff report.

FINANCES

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

This will take time and will not be accomplished in one year. Accurately reflecting the full cost of our current employees will force the city to save sufficient funds in the dedicated account now to ensure that in the decades to come we can pay our retired employees their earned pensions, despite any CalPERS shortfall due to overly optimistic rate of return assumptions.

The staff will be returning to the Finance committee on September 16th with their recommendations for how to achieve the requested \$4 million in reductions. In the past, the city manager has been able to reduce spending using attrition, so that may be a component of the plan. This is an area where it would be good to get broader input from the community on their preferences, so using a participatory budgeting process might be helpful as we work to address this problem over time.

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. The CDBG funds that were cut are unlikely to be restored to prior levels, so increasing the funding for these programs will necessarily compete with other funding requests.

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?

I'd like more information on which properties these are before I answer this question. I have visited all 36 of our parks, so am unsure what spaces this question is referring to.