



2020 City Council Candidate Questions

CITY GOVERNANCE

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?

PAT BURT

Yes. Certain of those changes would be through amending city policies, including to the City Council Policies and Protocols. Equally or more important is for the Council to understand how to and to reassert its full authorities in policy setting and oversight. In addition, needs a greater foundation in institutional knowledge, understanding of governing effectiveness.

REBECCA EISENBERG

Yes. The City Manager reports to the City Council, and it is the legal responsibility of the City Council to manage the City Manager. Although the City Council always has had the obligation to manage the City Manager, it has failed to do so effectively.

Management is a skill, and PA City Council has lacked that skill for years.

In my 25 years working in executive and management roles for private companies, I developed strong people management skills. I have managed teams as large as 20, including recruiting, training, and evaluating performance. I understand how to give direct reports clear instructions, and arm them with goals, values, and priorities to optimize their deliverables according to need. I know how to prioritize projects, always emphasizing larger values and goals. When a project is returned lacking data, I return it for completion.

Being a manager requires an ability to give constructive feedback, and to disagree. Some current city council members -- and some of my opponents -- point to a counterproduct need for "civility" and to "avoid conflict." In truth, it is a refusal to disagree that ultimately harms our community's interests.

This is particularly the case when wealthy private interests hire expensive lawyers to make scary threats. As an attorney with almost 30 years of experience, I am not scared by the fancy threats of expensive lawyers. I have negotiated thousands of successful outcomes on behalf of clients with expensive lawyers.

Also, I, unlike all sitting council members and all of my opponents, have decades of experience managing lawyers. This is important because the City Attorney also appears not to be managed effectively. Nor is, obviously, the Police Department, most of all Chief of Police Jonsen.

Having spent my career in tech, I am well-versed at working with difficult and strong personalities. I was hired by Peter Thiel at PayPal in 2001, and took the company public with him the following year. I joined Reddit as employee 18, and successfully spun it off from its corporate parent, negotiated a successful recapitalization, and launched it as an independent startup, alongside employees with whom I had little in common. Being able to collaborate with different personalities is a skill successful leaders must acquire. My accomplishments demonstrate that I have that skill.

I am the antidote to the city council's inability to manage its staff. I bring decades of management experience, negotiation skills, courage, and integrity...as well as thick skin and never-give-up-ness. I work extremely hard, and generate results.

LYDIA KOU

Palo Alto has what is called a "Strong City Manager" form of government. Basically, the City Manager is responsible for the day-to-day running of the city. The Council sets policy, including the budget, and makes other significant decisions. The Council's role is to set policy; it is not the City Manager's or City Staff's role. This seems to have been forgotten lately.

The staff – directed by the City Manager – assembles data, analysis, alternatives, and recommendations for the Council. Residents involved in various issues provide valuable analysis and alternatives to Councilmembers who will listen.

Restoring a healthy relationship between Council and the City Manager depends upon Councilmembers demanding and enforcing a principled process. Too often the City Manager presents to Council a recommendation that he expects will get majority support, undercutting Council's duty to hear from the public and assess the various alternatives. This creates circumstances where Council can appear to be little more than a rubber-stamp for the City Manager.

ED LAUING

The "balance of power" is an operational choice by council. They are the 7 elected representatives of the citizens who make all the laws and hire and evaluate the performance of the city manager. In my view the council too often passively reviews issues brought to them. And they sometimes do not follow up on assignments to staff, so the assignments are not completed. This has happened repeatedly on council referral of items to PTC.

Council needs set key priorities - being realistic about staff capacity. Council members take comfort in having "checked the box" by assigning every popular policy or project to staff for study or action. But it has been proven repeatedly that staff lacks the capacity to do it all; so staff, not council, ends up prioritizing the to do list. As a result, public expectations are often dashed and critical assignments come back to council for action lacking the necessary foundation for informed decisions. Or sometimes they don't come back at all! Council should make the hard choices about priorities with every added assignment and be prepared to add capacity if fundamental priorities require it.

I think the "job description" of a Palo Alto City Council member needs to change. They need to get much more hands-on to get prompt and viable results. Especially considering staff shortages, they can take initiative by reaching out to council members and staff in other cities to see what worked for them, reaching out to developers to see what will work in the future for them, and so on. They must take a proactive approach to gathering data and ideas on the big issues we need to solve.

STEVEN LEE

I'm running in large part because there is too much power or deference to our city manager and staff leadership and not enough in our council and in residents. Our city council needs to reassert its authority over staff in setting its own agenda and the direction of our community. We need city council members who are going to ask tough questions when assumptions and conclusions don't add up or when staff says something isn't do-able. We need council members who will do the nitty gritty work, who will probe beneath the surface and work with stakeholders, and insisting that we find a way to get to yes.

Under our current system of government, the council can only check the city manager with its firing, hiring and compensation powers. Unless our council is willing to use such blunt instruments to further check our city manager, we need to explore structural changes to our city charter, which may include giving the council or mayor more direct power over certain departments. I am also in favor of regularly surveying our residents about how they think our city manager is doing -- similar to a "vote of confidence/no-confidence" or "say on pay" for publicly traded companies.

RAVEN MALONE

As a council member, I will do my job of direction and oversight. This means being specific in directing the City Manager and Staff to ensure that the outcomes accurately reflect the will of the people, and holding them accountable accordingly.

GREER STONE

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.

GREG TANAKA

If the residents in my community communicated or indicated that they would like to see a change, then I would look into it and listen to what my community wants. In general, I think the un-elected city manager and staff have too much power relative to elected officials. However, the nature of elected officials is to be a reflection of the thoughts of their constituents and therefore I would continue to build strong community connections to act accordingly.

CARI TEMPLETON

I believe that the City Council must always listen to the diverse voices of all of its constituents, and ensure the City Manager and executives do as well. Through the recent shelter-in-place and other pandemic-related actions, we have identified opportunities for staff overreach, and the Council should close those loopholes immediately.

AJIT VARMA

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.