



## 2020 City Council Candidate Questions

### PUBLIC SAFETY

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

#### **PAT BURT**

The COVID emergency and its economic impacts have forced the city to make tough budget decisions. Rather than merely moderating the pace of an all-time record capital budget, the city chose to slash our city services: fire and police, libraries, parks and open space, community centers, transportation, Children's Theatre, and youth services. Less visible, but vital, functions like code enforcement, parking management, emergency services, and development oversight have also been chopped.

Staff proposed a bureaucratic approach, cutting departments across the board, including emergency services during a pandemic. They didn't offer many alternative options to the Council and the Council didn't challenge them to do so.

The council should be more actively engaged in the budget planning process. That means sometimes challenging staff recommendations which requires institutional knowledge, critical thinking, and leadership to identify and build support for feasible alternatives.

By just modestly reducing investments in big capital projects, re-bidding contracts, and curtailing raises, we could retain the services that define our community. Capital investments shouldn't be at the expense of critical services.

When I served on the Council, we adopted a 3-part strategic solution to our overdue infrastructure investments based on recommendations of the Infrastructure Blue Ribbon Committee. The plan was to grow new revenue, primarily from hotels, for capital projects rather than these projects coming at the expense of the valued services. Instead, the budget adopted by City Council prioritizes paying for new facilities and capital projects over services in this critical time.

In addition, some of the reductions in this year's capital budget should be reserved for contingency planning including:

- Increasing foothills fire prevention and response capabilities
- Contingency reserves for further declines in revenue and to meet emerging needs from the pandemic and economic aftermath

#### **REBECCA EISENBERG**

I strongly disagree with how the City recently slashed its budget. These cuts were entirely avoidable had the city council thought to diversify its revenue base beyond property tax, sales tax and hotel tax.

In particular, Palo Alto is the only city in the state (if not country) with a business presence that gives a full ride to our businesses. Although there are good reasons not to tax small and mid-sized businesses, as well as retail and restaurants, Palo Alto has zero reasons not to tax our largest businesses and employers. Palo Alto's major employers include Tesla, Palantir, Amazon, Facebook, and Alphabet -- all of whom have profited from the pandemic. These huge, extremely profitable multi-billion-dollar international corporations owe their success in part to their reliance on Palo Alto public services -- paid for entirely by residents -- and these huge companies easily would pay tax in Palo Alto, as they do in all of their other office locations -- if Palo Alto merely would have asked them to contribute.

But Palo Alto City Council consistently refused to tax our largest and most profitable businesses, including as recently as March, where the City Council voted 7 to 0 against including a business tax on the November ballot. By doing so, they refused to give Palo Alto residents a say in the matter of whether Palantir and Tesla should help pay for the recovery.

Rather, our current City Council decided that the residents must pay for the recovery. In slashing more than \$40 million of essential public services upon which residents rely, the City Council intentionally chose to subsidize Tesla and Palantir, while depriving our community's most vulnerable residents of services they relied on, and often even, their jobs.

Given Palo Alto's historic crisis-level jobs-to-employees ratio of 4-1, right now residents comprise 20% of the users of city services, but residents pay the entire tab. This is due to the intentional policies of the City Council.

On behalf of the residents, we need urgent change!

## **LYDIA KOU**

For the FY 20-21 budget, because of the pandemic, public safety should not have been cut and definitely not services to our community. Cutting public safety is cutting personnel, which will lead to the need for "browning out" and increases in overtime. Community service cuts were mostly in youth programs, which, during the pandemic, are needed for stress relief.

I released a Budget Survey; most residents who responded did not want city services cut. Unfortunately, I was in the minority when voting. City services, not Capital Improvement Projects were cut. This made no sense to me. Some Capital Improvement Projects could have been delayed until after the pandemic.

## **ED LAUING**

The starting point of the budget reduction target was appropriately aggressive. The starting point of the budget process this year was not correct. The council needed to be on the same page in terms of prioritizing public safety as #1. They also needed an agreed to approach of how cuts would be prioritized. Finally, all council members were not in agreement on whether this was a one -year or two-year reduction. After massive hours of heated debate and input from citizens via surveys and public comment, ultimately many of the services citizens want and expect from their city government were restored. However, with a solid game plan agreed to at the beginning, a massive amount of council cycles could have been saved, and the budget process could have been less polarized.

(Also see above my comments on my priority list for budget process.)

## **STEVEN LEE**

No, I don't agree. We should've taken a more critical look at our capital budget and deferred more of the "nice to have" projects in favor of preserving critical social and community services which are even more vital during these difficult times. I would have also looked at how we as a city can increase things on the revenue side, in particular exploring a progressive business tax that asks our larger, and still profitable businesses to pay their fair share during these difficult times in order to restore or preserve critical services.

## **RAVEN MALONE**

While I recognize the difficult choices that needed to be made with the budget shortfalls caused by the pandemic, I do not agree with the services that the City decided to cut from the budget. During this time, we have to prioritize our most vulnerable citizens to ensure that their basic needs, such as housing, community safety, education, and nutrition, are met. I would prioritize asking city management to reduce their salaries temporarily before asking our other employees to take a pay cut to make up for budget losses, along with reviewing which services are most essential for the community in the short-term. We should not be browning out fire stations in the midst of this disastrous fire season. We need to make sure we are making budget decisions that truly reflect the community's needs and interests.

## **GREER STONE**

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.

## **GREG TANAKA**

No, I was the only one who voted against it. Being the only dissenting vote, the City Council voted to cut more than 70 full-time positions from city hall to dig out of a financial hole left by the coronavirus pandemic. The city approved a budget with \$196 million in general fund expenses, a 20 percent reduction from the budget the council expected to consider before the start of the pandemic. I voted against this because there were better ways of handling the revenue drop instead of cutting libraries, youth programs, fire, and other community programs. These services are fundamental to the city and community of Palo Alto, they should not be sacrificed without exhausting every other option. For instance, the city is very top-heavy and would function the same or better with fewer expensive managers leaving more budget for the workers providing the services. I also do not believe that so much should be allocated to public relations and marketing utility bills. If a more representative approach is taken, it is possible to not have to sacrifice all the things that the people of Palo Alto love.

## **CARI TEMPLETON**

Although the Council must seek to balance the budget, particularly in light of the pandemic-related revenue shortfalls, I believe that our budget cuts must not come at the expense of community wellness and safety. Therefore, I appreciate the efforts to retain budget for youth services, Baylands staffing, libraries, and the arts, despite the city-wide budget reductions.

## **AJIT VARMA**

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.