



2020 City Council Candidate Questions

COMMUNITY LIFE

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

PAT BURT

1. We should re-instate the full code enforcement department staffing.
2. The city Attorney should more vigorously enforce fines.
3. Conditions of approval on projects should require detailed self reporting and certification by corporate officers upon penalty of perjury. Those reports should be readily available on the city website and should be automatically provided to neighboring impacted parties. These measures can significantly leverage and expand the effectiveness of city enforcement staff.

REBECCA EISENBERG

Thank you for asking! First, I would revive it from the dead. Palo Alto City Council has been on a tear to defund our city's inspections and enforcement office, even though Inspections and Enforcement is one of the few offices that has the potential to be profitable to the city. Other cities derive as much as several hundred million dollars a year for their general funds merely through enforcement of their zoning code and permits against the largest development projects -- who by the way were harming the public by their noncompliance.

Active enforcement departments are one of the few defenses with teeth that a city government can use to protect itself from wealthy private interests who take a mile when offered an inch -- a problem familiar to Palo Altans.

By abandoning our office of enforcement and inspection, Palo Alto City Council has ensured that the wealthiest businesses and entities face little or no opposition in their ever-greater demands to expand their presence and power at the cost of our residential neighborhoods.

Why do we stand for this?

LYDIA KOU

Without enforcement of City policy decisions and ordinances, they are meaningless and breed only dissatisfaction and disrespect for government.

With only one employee, I am not sure we actually have a working Code Enforcement Department. Anything we do would be an improvement. I am sure by reducing the City Manager's staff, asking each Department to again look at reducing waste. Any savings found and used to improve staffing in the vitally important Code Enforcement Department.

ED LAUING

This is primarily a staffing issue, so the solution is not mysterious. We need to staff up. But in the pandemic, this is one of the budget reductions. Additionally, I'd like to see the department actively enforce authorized penalties, especially in the case of repeat violators.

STEVEN LEE

Just as we have a successful emergency service volunteer program to augment our full time, emergency service staff, I think we need to look at how we can leverage the community's passion, expertise and time to help us do more with less to actually enforce our city code. I want to look at cities like Monterey Park who have a Code Enforcement Volunteer Program, which allows residents to work together with city staff to improve and preserve both residential and commercial neighborhoods, and enhance the quality of life for all. Community volunteers can act as additional eyes and ears on the ground, giving paid city staff additional time to address the needs of citizens, handle in-depth cases, and increase work productivity.

RAVEN MALONE

I would set clear guidelines as far as roles and responsibilities. I would also use one, efficient way to track complaints, instead of two. It's important that when receiving incomplete data, we follow up to get all missing information as well as more information that allows for a clear picture of the complaint. It is also important that we allow a clear way for the public to track their complaints. This not only shows the public that the City is taking valid complaints seriously, but also ensures the City will take action.

GREER STONE

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.

GREG TANAKA

Many cities have implemented smartphone app-based solutions to streamline the process. Palo Alto could do a lot better. I've been pushing for this. I would also like to hire more individuals to complete inspection promptly.

CARI TEMPLETON

Code enforcement in Palo Alto is distributed amongst numerous departments. We should talk with staff to determine if they are experiencing inefficiencies in how they are organized, and see what improvements they request could be quickly implemented. Because they are primarily complaint driven (subjective enforcement) rather than objective, this may also tend toward inequitable application of code enforcement. I would like to see reports on the enforcement to determine what types of inequities are currently present and try to fix them.

AJIT VARMA

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.