



2020 City Council Candidate Questions

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?

PAT BURT

First, the city needs to convene a stakeholder group of local serving businesses, community members, and large businesses/property owners to identify needs, recommend strategic actions, and build council/community support. Currently, city staff is the convener, filter and vehicle for soliciting input. The community is willing and able to support the survival and thriving of local services and retail. The city should also re-hire an economic development manager whose focus would be on local serving businesses, and attracting tech companies with business purposes benefit the region and society.

REBECCA EISENBERG

Other cities are exploring the following strategies that we should strongly consider as well:

1. Working to enact an emergency tax measure on our biggest, most wealthy local businesses, as well as other local special interests including landlords, many of whom have received PPP loans for millions of dollars, and already had those loans forgiven. In our midst are many wealthy corporate interests that are profiting from the pandemic, and that can afford to pay their fair share. In Mountain View's case, it's Google. In Palo Alto's case, it's Palantir and Tesla, in addition to Amazon.com, Facebook, and Alphabet -- all of whom have large offices in Palo Alto as well.
2. Turn (back) on our office of inspections and enforcement, and collect penalties from the wealthy special interests and commercial interests who have been breaking our municipal codes and their use permits without consequence for years, sometimes decades. As a reminder, penalty fees under the Palo Alto Municipal Code amount to \$500 per day per violation. The law provides that large companies with multiple violations must be fined for each violation every day, to clarify.
3. Do all we can to enact Prop 15, which explicitly protects small businesses from reassessment, and provides new tax relief just for small businesses.
4. Research state and federal initiatives, e.g. through CARES, that is intended to help small businesses survive.
5. With the money from 1-4, we can invest in our small businesses in some of the following ways: providing financial subsidies and no-interests loans (that can be forgiven just as easily as wealthy companies' loans were forgiven), investing in infrastructure projects that benefit our small business community, and responding directly to what they (not their landlords) tell us they need.
6. While also, we should: extend eviction moratoriums and rent relief for small businesses for as long as it takes, even if it takes a long time.

Palo Alto already has lost too many of our best small businesses, retail, and restaurants. I am heartbroken about the loss of Mayfield Cafe.

Many of these losses were avoidable. It was terrible saying goodbye to Antonio's Nut House -- a dive bar where I shared so many amazing memories with my Stanford friends in the 1980s. In explaining why they had to shut down the Nut House, Antonio's owners did not blame the pandemic as the primary cause.

Rather, the owners of Antonio's Nut House pointed mostly to the disruption caused by the nonstop extremely loud, pollution-creating, air-ruining, street-obstructing, light-blocking never-ending, wholly unnecessary, ugly, wasteful construction of the five-story parking garage a block away from the former restaurant -- a parking garage that until last week was on display, with the former restaurant as well, in our mayor's Zoom virtual background photo. What a cruel sight to be beholden to during city council meetings.

LYDIA KOU

So much has changed with COVID-19. Will employees continue to work at home? Will additional large employers leave Palo Alto? Will residents return to dine-in restaurants? Will fear of job loss reduce residents' spending?

We do not know whether the changes we are observing are short- or long-term.

I have recommended retaining an Economic Development Specialist whose job would be to work with downtown property owners, community-serving retail businesses, residents, and all levels of government to revitalize our downtown. A multi-pronged, cooperative approach will be required.

Life and business will not be the same; can we make it better?

ED LAUING

This is an extremely difficult question as businesses, merchants, and residents alike are struggling with the pandemic's impacts, creating widespread needs while also constraining all potential sources for new revenue. I have not been involved in the ongoing discussions with the business community regarding their specific needs or recommendations. That being said, as city funds are primarily resident-generated, I'm inclined to prioritize city assistance toward locally serving businesses.

STEVEN LEE

As a city the most impactful thing we can do is to get the spread of this disease under control. We need to do better education, outreach and enforcement of health orders and social distancing guidelines. If we don't get COVID-19 under wraps and if we have to reimpose stricter shelter in place requirements, it's going to be even more devastating on local businesses. So getting COVID-19 under wraps, the right way the first time is key.

Our city needs to play an even larger role in helping both residents and small businesses understand what the health orders and guidelines are. Since they are quite complex, situation dependent and constantly changing, it is hard for the public or small businesses to know, let alone, comply with these orders.

Many of the other ways our city can help small businesses during these difficult times are things we are already doing, but which we need to do more of. Things like:

1. Waiving utility fees for small businesses that are struggling.
2. Expanding funding for the City's small business grant program.
3. Reducing permit processing times, requirements and other overly burdensome regulations.
4. Evaluate how we might expand or improve the closure of California and University Avenues to help more businesses and provide some long term predictability so that small businesses know that their investments in parklets and other outdoor dining equipment will be well spent.
5. Improving two-way communication between city staff and the small business community, so that the city can be quicker to respond to changing conditions on the ground as well as providing clear and easy to follow guidance.

Having talked to a few small businesses, there really is no silver bullet solution here, other than trying to get COVID-19 under wraps sooner, and reopening only when it's safe to do so. Our city's ability to help will be severely constrained by our own revenue shortfall. We need to explore additional revenue sources, like a business tax on larger, still profitable businesses who aren't struggling during COVID-19 and utilize that revenue to help small businesses and preserve critical social and community services.

RAVEN MALONE

In my conversations with business owners, I've heard that they're having trouble planning long-term or understanding the rules that they need to abide by. We need to provide leadership with clearer guidelines for these small businesses, and help them to navigate their way through state, county, and city regulations and ordinances. Additionally, as we eventually come out of shelter-in-place, we should make sure they have the resources and permitting to continue operating and recovering. Lastly, encouraging further housing development in our Downtown and around transit hubs will create a strong and consistent customer base for these businesses.

GREER STONE

I will bolster the Palo Alto Small Business Relief Fund and the Small Business Recovery Grant Program so that struggling businesses, some of which have served our community for decades, stay in Palo Alto. Let's be clear, we can't save all businesses; I wish we could, but we can do more to help those struggling during this pandemic. We must also invest in our business community and provide them the tools they need to be successful here. I would promote the hiring of an Economic Development Manager who is experienced in bringing new businesses to town that complement existing businesses to attract new people and shoppers into our retail core. This person can also recommend programs, events, and incentives to support and attract retail services that create an experience for shoppers. This will be especially important as we look to recover from the pandemic's effects. Palo Alto is one of the only cities in the Bay Area that does not have such a critical position.

GREG TANAKA

Vacancy signs were already appearing in local retail and restaurant locations before COVID-19. But with our economy heading into one of the deepest recessions on record, local businesses are facing major additional challenges. Palo Alto is home to over [7000 businesses](#) and data shows that [92% of small businesses have been negatively impacted by the COVID-19 crisis](#). As a business owner, I understand how small businesses are being impacted. From adapting to quarantine restrictions to adjusting to the lockdown lift, to re-establishing their former customer bases and revenues we face [an economic recovery that could take up to 10 years](#). Given the current situation, many local businesses will fail if they don't receive immediate help.

Additionally, I believe actions should be taken by the city that efficiently delivers assistance to both residents and business owners. At the June 8th, 2020 Council meeting, I urged that [speed is of the essence](#) to provide support for local businesses. Before the meeting, I had met with different business owners on the best ways to support them during this pandemic. We also spoke with many community members to consider and understand the different benefits of the Summer Streets program as well as keeping the streets convenient to the community.

CARI TEMPLETON

I will seek to preserve existing businesses in Palo Alto by closely listening to their needs and working together to find solutions for them throughout the pandemic, and beyond. I will also advocate for better support services for our local businesses who are disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and might struggle with access to government relief programs.

I will also partner, via our Economic Development office, with organizations such as our local Chamber of Commerce to promote the needs of local businesses. I will also make sure our Economic Development office does specific outreach to local businesses to provide them information on microloan and small business loan programs, and supports them in preparing applications.

AJIT VARMA

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.