



## 2020 City Council Candidate Questions

### OFFICE DEVELOPMENT

**Would you as a councilmember encourage more working at home to reduce commuting, traffic, pollution, and climate change? If so, what specific steps would you take?**

#### **PAT BURT**

I would encourage greater WFH. Despite the “visionary” leadership of the tech community having been unable to foresee the benefits of WFH/remote work until it was imposed on them, we and they now see the multiple benefits of it long term in various forms: less traffic and pollution, lower office demand and office cost, and improved quality of life for workers.

The city (potentially in collaboration with other cities regionally) should explore remote work as a major component of significantly expanded TDM programs and through the city TMA, in combination with full enforcement mechanisms.

#### **REBECCA EISENBERG**

Palo Alto needs to provide fiber internet service to residents and public schools, as well as to child care sites (that it still needs to create, especially for public school children who lack quiet stable places to access remote learning at home).

Not only would fiber to home help our remote workforce, it also would help our many public school students whose connectivity problems are impeding their right to access equitable education. We must fix this.

That is how we can empower workers who have gained permission from their employers to work from home. Unfortunately, this won’t be enough for the vast majority of workers. In most cases, it is the employer who grants (or withholds from) its employees the right to work from home, regardless of employee interest.

Palo Alto should create incentives for employers to allow their workforce to work from home. This is important not only from a covid point of view, but also from a traffic, environmental, and residential costs point of view. One reason that residents’ utilities bills are so expensive is because energy becomes more expensive as more of it is consumed, and corporate use of energy drives up costs for all of us. (This is something we must fix, especially given that businesses pay no tax.)

That said, Palo Alto’s intentional policies have made it very difficult to incentivize our local employers to allow their workers to work from home. For one thing, because we don’t tax these employers, we have not collected information about who these employers are, and how many employees they have. Even more importantly, because we don’t tax these employers, we lack the most common tool to incentivize employers to change their behavior: tax credits. Every other city has these tools, given that Palo Alto is alone in choosing not to tax our employers.

This is yet another reason to put a business tax on our largest employers and most profitable businesses on the ballot as soon as possible. Without taxing the huge international corporations who have profited from the pandemic, and relying only on small businesses and residents, how can we recover?

#### **LYDIA KOU**

TDM: Traffic/Travel Demand Management

TDA: Traffic/Travel Demand Association/Agency

Absolutely. This pandemic has indicated that working at home for certain industries and jobs works. As a councilmember, I would work to create an ordinance as part of conditions of approval for TDMs that requires a certain percentage of employees to telecommute and for TMAs to require the same. However, I am concerned about how such an ordinance would be enforced, especially with Palo Alto's history of poor enforcement. A strong Code Enforcement Department is essential.

As a councilmember, I would also petition our State Assembly and State representatives asking that they sponsor telecommuting legislation. Separately, I would also petition for sponsorship of dispersing and providing incentives for jobs in areas where housing is already readily available, for example, Mountain House, CA.

## **ED LAUING**

I would certainly encourage WAH, and I think it is likely here to stay for many companies. Many of the largest companies with the largest workforces have announced permanent WAH options. This is a possible collateral benefit of the pandemic. WAH is proven to be effective and companies will use it to broaden their labor pools and reduce infrastructure costs like real estate leases, company-provided buses for commuting, meals, and so on.

However, that doesn't mean we claim "problem solved." As a large employer itself, the city should continue to encourage WAH post-pandemic. We should actively support the county's ongoing efforts to encourage more businesses to commit to WAH. But it remains very uncertain what the land-use landscape will look like: will demand for commercial space decrease, or will businesses seek more square-footage to accommodate social distancing among non-WAH workers? What will be the impacts on public transit, local retail, and public parking needs? The city will need to pay close attention and be prepared to act.

## **STEVEN LEE**

Yes, absolutely. But we have to realize that encouraging more working from home is not going to solve our commuting, traffic, pollution or climate change problems alone. All the evidence I have seen to date suggests that while more people will have the flexibility to continue working from home permanently, once COVID-19 is over, most employees will return to working in the office. Or as companies grow their employee base, we may not see a change in the amount of office space they utilize in Palo Alto.

That being said, one thing we need to do is evaluate which of our city employees can continue to work from home even after COVID-19 is over. We need to set a good example for other businesses in providing city workers with the continued flexibility to work from home either part time or full time depending on their particular personal or family needs. We also need to evaluate if we can use the purse strings to encourage contractors and service providers to use or encourage employees to work from home. Any efforts to encourage people to work from home will require us to work regionally to improve our internet infrastructure so that those who choose to can reliably work from home after COVID-19.

## **RAVEN MALONE**

We've seen during COVID that a lot more people can work from home than we previously thought. The City should absolutely encourage this in the future in order to reduce parking and traffic impacts, and to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions that come with commuter car trips. We should have stricter transportation demand management programs by employers and developers — not just suggestions. We can also support incentive programs, either run by employers or by Palo Alto Transportation Management Association (PATMA), and the Stanford Research Park TMA (SRPGo), that reward carpooling and working from home. The parking and traffic problems in Palo Alto are caused by jobs, not residents.

## **GREER STONE**

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a horrific tragedy, but shelter-in-place has revealed the potential of commuteless work. During a 7-week span at the height of shelter-in-place, greenhouse gas emissions in the Bay Area were reduced by 32% and traffic accidents decreased by 63%. The County of Santa Clara, in conjunction with local jurisdictions, is exploring policies to promote greater telecommuting after this pandemic has ended. Palo Alto should also consider exploring policies to promote and encourage telecommuting, so we can begin switching from a commuter town plagued with traffic congestion to a resident-focused community. Not only will this reduce traffic, but all the woes it brings with it: parking demand, congested streets, and unhealthy air quality. And it could feasibly free up office space for additional housing production.

## **GREG TANAKA**

I would encourage more working at home to reduce commute, traffic, pollution, and climate change. I am an avid biker and skateboarder, and I am known to rarely drive. I highly advocate for and encourage others to use alternatives to driving cars.

## **CARI TEMPLETON**

Not all jobs are suited for working from home, but we should still take steps to reduce commuting and traffic to reduce pollution and climate change. One important way would be to improve public transportation so that it is ample, frequent, electric, regionally-interconnected, and fare free in the region. We could encourage companies to purchase transit passes for their employees, for example, rather than funding private buses. Similarly, students and seniors could ride fare-free to encourage independence and reduce traffic associated with drop-off and pick-ups.

## **AJIT VARMA**

I would encourage biking and walking to work along with building mixed use buildings where people can live and work in close proximity.