



## **2020 City Council Candidate Questions**

### **Steven Lee Responses**

#### **EXPERIENCE**

##### **What experience with Palo Alto community issues would you bring to the council?**

I have had the privilege of serving Palo Alto as a human relations commissioner for the past three years working to make Palo Alto more welcoming, inclusive and responsive to all members of our community. I worked with our PTA and parents, students, service providers like ACS, and community groups to address our teen vaping epidemic. I worked with our CAC parents to improve the accessibility of our city programs and facilities to people and families of all abilities. I will bring 16+ years of local public service to the council - serving on local commissions and boards since I was 15 years old. During that time, I have worked with neighborhood associations, council members, city staff, service providers and other stakeholders to collaboratively find solutions to community issues. I currently am a member of the Midtown Residents Association Steering committee, where I help plan our annual ice cream social, emergency preparedness initiatives, and improve communication between residents and our city.

#### **GOALS**

##### **What are the top three goals you want to achieve in the next four years on the city council?**

The three most important issues facing our community are housing, climate change, and addressing all forms of inequality.

1. Housing is absolutely my top priority because it is inextricably linked to many of the other issues our community is facing, including: traffic and public transportation, homelessness, climate change, racial, economic and gender inequality, declining enrollment in our public schools and public safety.
2. Climate change is another top priority. While we have made major progress on the issue in the past decade, this is an existential threat to my generation and the next generations and we will need to make even bolder, swifter and larger changes to reduce carbon emissions even further, especially with regard to transportation, and adapt to a changing climate.
3. I will work diligently to address all forms of inequality because I believe that Palo Alto should be a place that works for all of us, regardless of our respective identities, abilities, where we work or what our needs may be.

#### **PUBLIC SAFETY**

##### **How would you help set policies for PAPD to address racial profiling and use of excessive force?**

As a Human Relations Commissioner I have and will continue as a Council Member to work on greater police accountability, transparency and reform. No group, lest our PAPD, can be realistically expected to reform or hold itself accountable, which is why it's even more important that our council, our HRC and our community play that role. We should all be intimately involved in reviewing and reforming all of our various police policies, collecting and making available to the public statistics and other records to show us how the department and individual officers are performing. We also need to more publicly, more regularly and more quickly audit our PAPD on a wider range of metrics and scenarios -- and ultimately insist on stricter penalties for officers who do not meet our highest community values and standards.

**What are your thoughts on “defunding” and/or reorganizing the police department? What changes do you want to see in our police department? If you would cut its budget, where would you apply the savings?**

I believe we need to dramatically re-imagine public safety in our community. We need to identify what responsibilities we can take off the police department's plate and reassign them (and the associated funding) to unarmed and better & specifically trained professionals like mental health professionals, social workers, etc. We should take a good look at the Santa Clara County's Crisis Response Team which pairs a police officer with these unarmed, better trained mental health professionals, and determine if we can adopt that model or elements of it in Palo Alto. We also need to take a more holistic view of public safety. It is critical and more cost effective in the long term to fund services for low-income, minority and other underserved populations. We need to be more proactive in addressing the root causes of crime, instead of merely being reactionary and only focused on how large or well funded our police department is.

## **CITY GOVERNANCE**

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

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.

**What is your position on Proposition 15, the constitutional amendment to require commercial and industrial properties to be taxed based on their market value, rather than their purchase price?**

Yes, I support Proposition 15. It's time that business owners begin to pay more of their fair share to support our K-12 public schools, community colleges and the services provided by local governments.

**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?**

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.

**Palo Alto has a wealth of talent and knowledge in its residents, but often hires consultants with little expert knowledge of the city. Should the city utilize the talent and knowledge of its residents differently, and if so, how?**

Yes, we don't leverage the tremendous talent, knowledge, time or expertise of the residents and groups in our community enough. We need to look at expanding participation through our commissions, committees, task forces and when we conduct studies. The Council has limited time and yet it tries to do all of the heavy lifting work itself, which means the council ends up being overly dependent on staff and outside consultants, who are either overworked or not best suited for this work. We end up with delayed action and/or action that isn't nearly as good or as responsive as it can be. We need to leverage and utilize our residents and commission more,

enabling them to do a lot more of the heavy lifting, detail work and outreach to our community - and we need to listen and follow their advice more.

## **HOUSING**

**RHNA states that Palo Alto's greatest housing need is for units affordable by those earning 80% and below Area Median Income. Do you support this goal and, if so, how would you accomplish it?**

For me, the key takeaways from RHNA is that we haven't done nearly enough to address the housing crisis both in terms of affordable and market rate housing. We continue to have a 3-1 jobs to housing imbalance that we need to address with more housing at virtually every price point that enables people from different racial, economic and professional backgrounds to live in Palo Alto, which includes firefighters and teachers. While we do need more affordable units, that can't be our sole goal. Our community is being adversely impacted by our inability to build both market rate and affordable housing.

We need to reduce barriers to building dense housing along transit corridors and near job centers. Since land acquisition is itself a huge barrier, we need to leverage land owned by various governments and interested faith based communities to build affordable and workforce housing, including at Cubberley.

**PAN has officially endorsed Alternative M, which was brought to the NVCAP working group by several PAN members. What innovative ways might you explore to pay for low income housing and BMR housing in North Ventura and other sites in Palo Alto?**

We need to explore a progressive business tax that asks our largest and still profitable businesses to pay their fair share and invest more in housing and related infrastructure needs to support our community and their employee base. Depending on how we structure a business tax (amount, size of business, who is and isn't exempt) we could potentially raise \$10-\$50m dollars a year to support housing, traffic mitigation and other vital community services. We also need to look at how we leverage land owned by various governments and by interested faith based communities. Land acquisition is a huge cost. If there are parties with land who are interested in developing affordable housing, we need to enable them to do so and the city needs to do the heavy lifting because often these third parties don't have the time, expertise or money to develop their land assets on their own.

**What would you do to protect existing rental housing and its tenants?**

I strongly believe in the 3Ps -- we need to preserve housing, protect tenants and produce housing. As a renter myself, I think it is important that good tenants have stability and predictability when it comes to their housing arrangements, especially during COVID-19. As a city, we need to ensure that good tenants are not being taken advantage of or being treated unfairly by "bad-actor" landlords. Most landlords, including my own, are good landlords. They keep reasonable rents, with modest increases every so often, they only evict tenants for good reasons and they are generally responsive to the needs of their tenants. Renter protections aren't targeted at these good landlords nor would they be adversely impacted by them. But they will help protect good renters, who often have less power and fewer resources, against "bad actor" landlords.

My parents are literally mom and pop landlords (not in Palo Alto). I understand how difficult it may be for these types of landlords to make a profit, if any at all. As long as landlords are good landlords, we don't want to do anything that causes them to be negatively impacted, especially if their own livelihood or fixed income relies on their one or two rental units.

**Do you support ending single-family residential (R-1) zoning? Why or why not?**

I support getting rid of exclusionary zoning. I think there are ways to encourage and build duplexes, triplexes and quadplexes that compliment and blend in well with existing single family neighborhoods. This will help us to also tackle our housing crisis and enable young and diverse families to live in Palo Alto, something we'll need to maintain and enhance the stability, diversity and vibrancy of our neighborhoods, and help reverse declining enrollment in our schools and other impacts experienced by our community due to lack to housing.

## **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?**

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.

### **Regarding the Jobs/Housing Imbalance, how much, where and what kind of new office space can Palo Alto sustain? Should Palo Alto consider rezoning office properties to reduce the amount of future office development?**

My sense is that we have enough office space and we don't need to make our jobs:housing imbalance any worse. So my first choice would be to not build any new office space anywhere -- with the exception of perhaps office space for critical service providers like mental health professionals and other nonprofits who serve vulnerable communities.

If however, the only way to get more housing is to allow office, then I would out of necessity, I might be open to compromise -- but the proof will be in the details of the specific proposal. I'll have to weigh the impacts of adding the office versus the impacts of not building any housing. Housing is the core issue when looking to address many of the key issues people in our community care about. I will strive to find ways other than office space to make new housing projects more feasible and affordable.

### **What other ideas do you have for incentivizing housing construction over office construction?**

We need to update our zoning laws to prohibit, limit or disincentivize office construction. My sense is that if we are serious about digging ourselves out of our 3-1 jobs to housing imbalance, we shouldn't be allowing or incentivizing any more office construction. But as the question acknowledges, we can't just stop there. We need to incentivize housing construction by removing barriers to building dense housing along transit corridors and near jobs by re-evaluating height limits, parking requirements and providing a more predictable and reliable approval process.

## **TRANSPORTATION/TRAFFIC**

### **What do you see as our most serious traffic issues and how would you fix them?**

### **Should businesses be responsible for reducing traffic and parking impacts? Should the businesses pay for the remedies and how? What is the City's role?**

Businesses and our city have a shared role in reducing traffic and parking impacts. We have to acknowledge that our city council for decades have approved unchecked office growth without requiring the necessary housing to go along with it. We, through our elected officials, have enabled this problem in the first place. It is important that we elect candidates this coming November who will get serious about traffic and parking impacts and acknowledge the huge role housing (or rather the lack of housing) has played in generating these traffic and parking impacts. The city needs to get serious about building more market rate and affordable housing near transit corridors and near job centers in order to get our 3-1 jobs to housing imbalance under control. That is the only real way we are going to address traffic and parking impacts. We also need to ask our larger, still profitable businesses to step up, pay their fair share and invest in the services and infrastructure necessary to reduce traffic and parking impacts and more generally support the needs of our community.

## **What changes, if any, would you make to our city's parking requirements and residential parking programs?**

In order to encourage the type of housing development we need to address our 3-1 jobs to housing imbalance, we need to seriously reevaluate our parking requirements, to make it easier for these housing developments to pencil out. While we do that, however, we need to strengthen and expand our residential parking programs so that we discourage or limit additional vehicular traffic which might impact nearby neighborhoods.

## **COMMUNITY LIFE**

### **How would you improve our city services and how would these improvements be funded?**

Our council just had to cut approximately \$40m from our budget, including deep cuts to city services. If elected, I will seek to restore funding for these critical city services by looking more critically at our capital improvement plan, and evaluating which "nice to have" city projects can be delayed like our police building and parking garages in order to preserve and maintain critical city services and programs which are needed now more than ever because of COVID-19.

We also need to look at putting in place a progressive business tax, which asks only larger, still profitable businesses who are doing well even during COVID-19 to step up and pay their fair share, to help maintain and invest in critical services when nearly everyone else is being impacted financially.

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

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.

### **What should the City do with its 8 acres of Cubberley?**

Any discussion of Cubberley will definitely need to be done in concert with PAUSD. With such a large lot owned in part by the City and in part by PAUSD, we have a once in a generation opportunity to build a beautiful, bold and innovative community space that addresses and responds to multiple community needs. I imagine a neighborhood-appropriate, compact, well-designed shared-use campus that incorporates space for a secondary school, if the district needs one, along with significant increases in community space and open space. I also think we can increase community space and open space while also building teacher and senior housing on site. If we work together, listen to each other's concerns and needs, I believe we can do all of these things and create a campus that we and future generations can be proud of.

### **Many organizations are having a difficult time recruiting volunteers, including many Palo Alto commissions. What would you do as a council member to encourage more people to participate in city government and civic organizations?**

Decisions are ultimately made by those who show up, which is why it's important for a diverse and representative cross section of our community to serve on our Palo Alto commissions. We need to expand, not reduce, the size of our commissions, so that more people can participate in city government, and so that the burdens and projects are more manageably divided amongst a larger pool of commissioners. Staff has not shown that there are any cost savings associated with reducing the size of our commissions. If anything, having more residents, who are experts in many fields and who are closer to the needs and concerns of our community, involved in our commissions, will enable our city to do more and be more responsive and timely to the needs of our community.

First thing I would do is to restore and expand the size of our commissions. We also need to evaluate the obstacles that prevent more people and diverse people from participating, which may include re-evaluating when and how often commissions meet so that they better align with the schedules of busy working professionals who have families.

Currently women, minorities and young people are under-represented in our community.

- Women only represent 35% of current commissioners versus 52% of the overall community.
- Minorities only represent 15% of current commissioners versus 32+% of the overall community
- Millennials only represent 10% of current commissioners versus around 30% of the overall voting-age community.

In addition to improving recruitment efforts and actually appointing more diverse commissioners, we also need to reduce the systemic barriers that prevent participation, including looking to permanently allow residents to participate in commission and council meetings via zoom or providing additional training to newer, or inexperienced commissioners who may have the passion and time but who may need to be brought up to speed faster on current issues. We also need to empower and listen to our commissioners more so that they feel and know that their time is being spent well and that they are having an impact and say in our city's decisions.

**Neighbors who were following the two supermarkets, first at Edgewood Plaza and then at College Terrace were dismayed that the City did not enforce the promises made by developers to provide for a grocery store. The City then did not fully collect the penalties that were due the City when the developers failed to provide the grocery stores. How the City should handle such matters?**

As a lawyer, I strongly believe that if we are going to have rules and penalties, then we need to fully enforce them. Otherwise what is the point of having them in the first place? Our residents should be able to trust that when we include certain provisions as part of the larger bargain with the community, that down the road we are actually going to hold developers to said provisions. We need to improve our code enforcement operations and actually enforce the promises that developers make to our community. Whether a developer has followed through on those promises should be a vital component in evaluating whether those developers are allowed to do work in our city in the future.

**Given that some neighborhoods are closer to the train stations and to services than others, how would you balance the recommendation by housing agencies to concentrate growth in those areas with the livability of those neighborhoods?**

I don't see the two as mutually exclusive as long as we listen to neighborhood concerns carefully, mitigate impacts and plan accordingly. Density along transit corridors makes a lot of sense, it helps take advantage of all of the synergies of being near public transit. We can mitigate parking concerns by putting in place a residential parking permit program to ensure that there isn't a substantial increase in parking or traffic issues in these areas while also encouraging the use of public transit, and bike & pedestrian routes. Having dense housing within walking distances of services makes for a much more livable and vibrant neighborhood.

## **GRADE SEPARATION**

**Palo Alto is considering grade-separation designs with a wide range of price tags. What are your preferred solutions? How important is project cost in selecting grade-separation designs?**

**If buying residential properties allows the City to improve a grade-separation design and/or reduce its cost, should the City acquire these properties? Or should the City only consider designs that require no property acquisitions?**

I am not in favor of any grade separation proposals that involve the taking of entire properties. We should not be displacing families or reducing our housing stock, especially given our current housing crisis. If residents were voluntarily interested in selling their property that would be a different question, but I doubt that enough homeowners would be willing to make that sacrifice.

Grade separation will likely be one of the most expensive capital projects in our city's history. While we need to be thoughtful about the various solutions in front of us, we do need to get moving on making a decision. There are no perfect solutions and there will be tradeoffs. So we need to evaluate the options based on which ones have the most serious impacts to our most vulnerable segments of our community -- and make a decision accordingly. Assigning relative weights to each design criteria will help us eliminate some of the noise

associated with each plan and focus on the options, which while imperfect, provide for the best outcome for the most people in our community over the long term. We also need to make a decision soon so that we don't miss out on funding from outside the city.

## **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?**

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 cities 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.