



## **2020 City Council Candidate Questions**

### **CITY GOVERNANCE**

**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?**

#### **PAT BURT**

I have long been a believer in and committed to leveraging, enhancing, and empowering community resources and intellectual capital.

I began my community engagement through leading the University South Neighborhoods Group through the successful SOFA Coordinated Area Plan. As Mayor in 2010, I co-initiated the IBRC infrastructure task force. I also: led in embracing community expertise during the High Speed Rail period, led in establishing a multi-stakeholder group (contrary to staff objections) for the Comprehensive Plan, advocated for a CSS based multi-stakeholder group on grade separations (and opposed a very expensive staff/consultant driven process), supported the NVCAP process (and advised community members on how to wrestle their proper authority from the staff and stakeholders), created a community group to advocate for a business tax to fund transportation and affordable housing, facilitated consensus on the Witon Ct affordable housing project, and led a group of community leaders advocating for a series of collaborative initiatives in response to the COVID emergency.

#### **REBECCA EISENBERG**

Yes. Palo Alto's biggest asset is its community. There are literally hundreds of highly educated, extremely knowledgeable, expert residents who are pleading for the opportunity to volunteer their services to the city, but city council shuts them out. Their refusal to include community experts is interfering with their ability to succeed. Their refusal to hear community perspectives is eroding public trust.

I zoom into virtually every city council meeting, and stay the entire duration. During these meetings, I have heard thousands of articulate appeals from community members, begging for racial justice, economic fairness, the preservation of their beloved community services (like Children's Theatre), and even asking for their jobs to be spared. Not once has the city council ever responded to these appeals, except occasionally (by the mayor) to "correct" them.

Often, the city council loses a quorum the moment it's time for the community to speak. And, even though the city council gives each speaker a tiny two minutes to state their feedback, we still hear the council members complain about "long meetings" and "tedious proceedings" that are potentially infringing on their "vacations." (Vacations.) If being forced to hear the real life concerns of community members is tiresome, then the city council member is not well suited for the position. This exhaustion with city government work is particularly ironic given the dozens of residents who would be thrilled to be delegated some functions.

Palo Alto used to be a city known for innovation and an entrepreneurial spirit. It felt that way to me when I attended Stanford in the 1980s. Now we are a city whose leaders fear change, and who take pride in their unwillingness to try anything new. We need to return to our innovative roots!

I propose forming a volunteer corps of community members who are interested in rolling up their sleeves and helping solve many of our problems. This corps also can include a committee dedicated to exploring the many ways in which community members can assist.

If other city council members are too busy to coordinate with these volunteer corps, I will be happy to take on that role. It is the least I can do, in the context of a community that seeks to serve.

## **LYDIA KOU**

The city's processes require staff do "community outreach". I see residents attend meeting after meeting. They educate staff and the consultants and improve their proposals. Staff then discards residents' ideas and their ideas are never presented to Council.

Here are a couple of examples:

Cubberley design and planning – the City engaged a consultant, Concordia, to lead with the community engagement process. Over 175 community members participated in the outreach and attended these meetings. Presentation after presentation occurred with drawings of the site and directions as to what to be considering. Then, at the last meeting, the city directed Concordia to throw in housing. Why was this not part of the discussion from the very beginning?

North Ventura Coordinated Area Plan (NVCAP) – Palo Alto has a very successful Coordinated Plan in place already, the SOFA project. Inviting SOFA project stakeholders with the institutional knowledge to guide the North Ventura Coordinated Area Plan would have helped avoid the debacle it is today. The NVCAP has one proposal that calls for 1,600 housing units in 8 story buildings and, as always, not enough parking.

These examples of planning led by City Hall leaves the impression of not dealing in good faith.

## **ED LAUING**

TRUE TEAMWORK should be in place from the beginning between outside consultants and our residents. Citizens have the local knowledge, professional expertise, and the ear of their neighbors. Consultants should have domain expertise and best practice guidelines, but how those concepts play out depends on their on-the-ground experience in any given city. I have been stunned and disappointed in the poor work I have seen by some consultants in my 10.5 years on two commissions. And consultants don't come cheap. Citizens should be granted more "clout" by Council on the citizen committees that are created – to ensure better outcomes and greater return on investment.

## **STEVEN LEE**

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.

## **RAVEN MALONE**

I want to prevent contracting out city services and bringing outside consultants into our city as much as possible. We should be listening to the community directly to solve their own issues and take advantage of the talent and knowledge of our own residents.

## **GREER STONE**

Absolutely. One of my top priorities is promoting a closer government-community partnership. We should embrace that energy and find ways to include our incredibly talented populace in decision making. We pay millions on consultants on issues residents may be just as versed in and willing to do as volunteers. Community committees composed of actual Palo Altans, who are impacted by these decisions, can be much more beneficial than a paid consultant who knows nothing about our city. A great example of this can be seen in the NVCAP process. The city consultants have cost our city thousands and their proposals for the NVCAP will only worsen our city's jobs-housing imbalance and adds an insufficient amount of affordable housing. However, our residents have submitted their plan called Alternative M that would create 400 affordable units and 770 other housing units through office phase-out and focused zoning.

## **GREG TANAKA**

Yes, the City should definitely utilize the knowledge of its residents. One way that I stand out as a councilmember is that I have consistently held office hours every Sunday for the past 4 years. I value true dialogue and listening to all perspectives of a topic. This allows me to make better decisions. I highly encourage residents to speak up to be heard by our City. I, who has lived in Palo Alto for the last 16 years, recognizes the diverse experience and talent of Palo Alto residents. By continuing community outreach, I believe that these talents can be more effectively used, in a team, to improve the quality of life for all residents.

## **CARI TEMPLETON**

Outsourcing can often be driven by the project's budget rather than its requirements, or by the need to compensate for unfilled vacancies in staff, but these approaches are not always going to bring the best outcome for the city. Whenever possible, it's best to ensure the City is properly staffed by experts who are familiar with the specific needs of Palo Alto.

Our City's panels, boards, and commissions are a great way to tap into our residents' immense creativity and bring their innovative voices into government decision-making. Our campaign focuses on improving the way that the Council recruits and appoints these bodies so that we hear from more diverse voices as we work to improve our City.

## **AJIT VARMA**

Of course, we have a very active and intelligent city and we shouldn't dismiss their views so quickly like we do today.