



2022 City Council Candidate Questions

Alex Comsa Responses

EXPERIENCE

What experience with Palo Alto community issues would you bring to the council? Describe your personal experience with Palo Alto City government and recent issues that have come before public hearings at the city council or other board and commissions. What was your role? (For example, did you send an email, speak to the Council, lead a group of citizens, etc.?) How extensively were you involved?

Throughout my real estate career, I experienced all sorts of housing problems: ghost houses, delays in receiving permits, issues with building permits, environmental issues related to construction, construction traffic management, parking tickets for construction workers, rental evictions, and more.

My recent experience with the City of Palo Alto is related to the Business Tax proposal. I learned about the new proposal, met with a few active members of our community and small business owners and got an overall picture of where those funds will go. With my research, I decided to go in front of the City Council and support the new Business

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

Those three goals would be my campaign priorities:

1. Smart Housing – Creating and executing on a detailed plan in order to meet the housing element (in line with state law, we have to add 6,086 units over the next eight years) in conjunction with making sure we have the infrastructure in place too (such as schools and transportation), and preserving the character of Palo Alto too. We can achieve both!
2. Economic Recovery – City Budget and Small Businesses: Making sure the small business sector gets back on track, as small businesses need help now more than ever. The City Budget needs to be balanced as if we don't have funds in place, we would not be able to implement all these great programs in order to improve the quality of life of our community.
3. Community Health and Public Safety: Besides supporting and implementing programs such as Safe Street for Palo Alto, I would focus on improving Public Safety. We need to restore some of the vacancies in Palo Alto Police's staff to make sure we have a fully staffed and efficient Police Department. Also, we need to introduce more technology to our Police Department so we can improve its efficiency and its integration with our surrounding cities. The goal is reducing the crime rates that we are currently experiencing, potentially to the pre-Covid level.

Which issue facing Palo Alto concerns you the most and why?

Public Safety: the posts I see on Nextdoor and the feedback I get from business owners in Downtown are just depressing, and that needs to be stopped. We need to restore Public Safety in our town, whether by hiring appropriate Police staff and/or by using more technology. I personally interacted with PA Police and Menlo Police when my son's bike got stolen last Fall, and I felt like I was on my own. First, we were told to just file a police report, but as we found our bike being sold online, a couple of days later, I contacted Police again and let them know that I found the thief and that he is actually selling 20 other bikes too. Police's story didn't change: "we can't do anything if you don't have

the serial number, and your bike is around \$600 anyway, so we can't arrest that person even if we prove that it is your bike". I told the officer that I have pictures of the bike with the specific lighting items that were custom installed, and that I even know the combo code of the locking system too, but that was not enough. I didn't feel it was right to just buy my bike back, so although I had cash with me to buy it back, I decided to walk to the seller's location, about one hour of walking from my house and called Menlo Police on my way there. Same story as I got from the local Police, so I mentioned to the officer that I am actually minutes away from meeting with the seller, and that if I have a chance to test drive the bike, I may just take off, and the officer said that it is dangerous, so said "that's why we are having this conversation", so he agreed to meet with me in a few minutes. I showed him pictures of the bike, he went to the seller's place, retrieved my bike in two minutes, and met with me two blocks away with the bike. He spent ten minutes on the phone with me explaining why he can't help instead of actually spending two minutes to retrieve the bike. The officer gave me a ride back, with the bike on the Police car too, and we chatted regarding the challenges they have within the department, which was really being understaffed. At the end, I was glad I got the bike back, but I don't want other community members to have similar experiences. We simply need to improve our Public Safety.

What type of campaign finance reform, if any, would you support?

It is ridiculous that previous CC candidates raised around \$100k to run a small political campaign. This year, 2-3 candidates are heading that route based on current funding efforts, and I feel the pressure to match that to compete for expensive marketing efforts. One single mailer, to all Palo Alto voters, is in the range of \$15k, so three of those would be \$45k. This is just a waste of money, and yes, I would support a campaign finance reform as follows:

Individual contributions (monetary and non-monetary) to be capped at \$500 (\$1000 for joint accounts)

Contributions from business entities or similar organizations to be capped at \$1000.

Total CAMPAIGN budget (monetary and non-monetary) to be capped at \$20,000.

Forums and debates like PAN are wonderful ways to actually get candidates exposed to voters in general, and this is a very efficient and cost-effective way for the candidates to share their platforms with the public. Kudos to PAN for taking the lead on this effort.

HOUSING

Where do you stand on the "one-size-fits-all" state unfunded mandates, like SB 9 and 10, that dictate land use and zoning in our City and why?

In general, I don't like "one-size-fits-all" mandates, as I feel we need to have some input and control at a local level. Do SB9 and SB10 create more housing? Yes, and we need that to meet the housing element, but I also feel like we need to rely on our own ARB in order to approve projects that fit our neighborhood in order to mitigate tension between neighbors. My mom experienced something similar where the local government approved a ridiculous building next door, on the property line, and now she is not even saying hi to the neighbor next door; therefore, we don't need these types of conflicts in our neighborhood. We are all aiming for a welcoming city (-:

I believe that SB9/SB10 will have very little effect on our city as these mandates don't really fit our city: in most cases, the math doesn't work.

I can't emphasize enough that meeting the housing element is imperative, so we can keep control of the zoning at a local level, as we need input from our Planning Dept and ARB on our Palo Alto projects.

What, if anything, would you do to protect existing rental housing and its tenants?

Rental market is confusing and 46% of the Palo Altans are renters. More affordable units would create a pool for renters to have access to as alternatives in case tenants need to be relocated. If the City would have affordable housing within its portfolio, then assistance to renters in need could be provided very effectively. Also, I feel that the small business owners are hanging by a hair since the rent is so expensive and their revenue is still not at the pre-Covid levels, mainly because office people have not returned to offices in a full-time manner, and most of them are still working from home. Working from home or in a hybrid mode changed our needs for housing as everyone is seeking larger homes/condos/apartments, and renters, in this case, may feel cramped in their current houses and on the other hand, may not afford to upgrade for a larger place. Again, more affordable houses would alienate some of these issues.

What are your thoughts on limiting upzoning only for 100% affordable housing?

Affordable housing is one of the top priorities for any City Council these days, and I believe 80% of Palo Alto would agree with that. I believe the current City Council is supporting the upzoning for the San Antonio area, and that's obviously one way to incentivize development. I seem to be in line with the current City Council on this one, and I would probably support the upzoning for projects that make sense, with the main focus on creating more affordable housing, but not sure if I would limit it to affordable only. Unfortunately, the City is not set up to drive projects like 100% affordable, and we need to rely on private developers to help re creating housing. We need the City to be more proactive in driving projects instead of being at the mercy of developers and reacting to issues. Being PROACTIVE is the way to go.

Given the housing shortage, would you support Palo Alto taxing 'ghost houses' via a vacant home tax?

Don't get me started on this topic. Young families are leaving our district due to high home prices driven by the small supply of homes, and we can't afford, as a community, to have ghost houses around us. Also, it is not safe either to have empty houses next door, since our community is known for neighbors that are looking after each other. I dealt with ghost houses throughout my real estate career, and I am supporting taxing "ghost houses", but the code enforcement department within our city is known to be less proactive. Also, some of these "investors" are very wealthy and they can actually afford to keep these houses empty, so the taxation needs to be very substantial in order to incentivize those owners/investors to either rent those houses out or occupy them.

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

Yes, we need to create more housing to meet the housing element. One way to incentivize housing construction is actually by making it more attractive for owners/developers, and that could be achieved by tweaking some limits related to density, FAR, and similar. WE really need projects that are situated next to transit hubs for obvious reasons such as climate change, quality of life for residents, and more ... so I would be inclined to support even more incentives that could be related to parking reduction if, of course, that is backed by traffic studies. Mix-use projects should be prioritized too, so we could have some of the retail stores on the first level, but I also acknowledge that small retail shops are having a really hard time surviving in our town. How can we bring these shops back to our Downtown? That's a good question. Maybe in some of the city-owned properties.

COMMUNITY LIFE

Residential satisfaction with quality of life in Palo Alto has steadily decreased in recent citizens surveys. How do you envision keeping true to the character of Palo Alto? How would you balance parks, local amenities, etc., as Palo Alto's population grows?

Well, the pandemic didn't help, but definitely, public safety is a major contributor to the decreasing quality of life. We also need a more vibrant and prosperous DT or similar areas, so a master plan to address the DT needs to happen sooner than later. Housing projects are to be placed where it makes sense, and I am addressing that through a very comprehensive and itemized proposal to address the housing element, as I truly believe that we can achieve both: preserving the character of Palo Alto but also meeting the housing element. Although I feel like we are in a good spot regarding parks and local amenities, I would support the addition of bike lanes to connect the parks and the open space.

Also, I got some feedback re adding more tennis courts and also the need for more open space, so will definitely look into those if elected. As an active person, I really feel like we need a community gym in DT as it is such a nice way to interact with other community members through exercising and sports. The only DT gym, Form Fitness, will close doors in December and I have to find a new community gym, just like other dozens/hundreds of members, but there is no such thing around DT anymore. I can talk about this story for hours, but many PA residents have similar stories, so we really need local amenities like community gyms in our neighborhood.

Our Community Center may need to be a bit more vibrant, and perhaps we can have an extension of the Community Center in the City Hall building after the Police Department gets relocated by Cal Ave: a new community gym, coffee shop, a lounge, and other amenities.

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

Most people would say that traffic is created by large businesses, and that is partially true. Stanford, as our larger nearby employer is also a big factor here, as they employ almost 30,000 people, not to mention that large employers like VMware are situated in Stanford Research Park. I would LOVE to say that adding affordable housing will fix the traffic issue, and it will, but insignificantly, since we have about 100,000 employees in Palo Alto, and adding 2,000 affordable units will sadly not fix the traffic issue.

Public Transportation is definitely a solution since our PT system needs to be more efficient otherwise people will continue to use cars as the main means of moving around. A HUGE part of the solution is getting more people to bike, so it is imperative to have a Safe Route to School program in place and add more biking boulevards too.

However, I think that the main fix for the traffic issues is the Grade Separation project. If you have access to electric trains every 15 minutes, and if you have to meet someone for lunch in DT Burlingame, you may be inclined to take the train versus driving there and deal with parking issues.

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?

This is related to the question above, and yes, large businesses (actually all businesses) could incentivize employees to take the train (assuming we have a good system in place) but the current TDM programs don't work since there is no capacity in trains. Again, Stanford needs to come to the table and address the traffic issue as we are in the same boat.

Also, the Business Tax measure will generate some revenue for the grade separation, and with more funding from the State/Fed, we could implement it, so it is imperative that the Business Tax measure moves forward as this is also a way for businesses to have an impact of the traffic reduction.

The city's role is to make sure we implement projects like Grade Separation or similar in a timely manner and as efficiently as possible by bringing all these players together for the benefit of our community to ensure a bright future for our beloved city.

CITY GOVERNANCE

Would you make any changes to the balance of power between the city manager and staff and the elected City Council entrusted to carry out the will of the people? If so, how?

I truly believe that we need to build better community relations and that we need to have the city engaged with members of PAN or similar organizations. Also, one option is having a full-time Elected Mayor, not to mention a more aggressive and efficient City Council. If elected, I will lead to a more united, decisive, and efficient City Council.

Are you in favor of the Palo Alto Fiber project that proposes to build Fiber to the Home? Why or why not?

This project requires LOTS of resources and I would not view it as a top priority. I am all in with regards to supporting disadvantaged communities in general, but the private sector is addressing the HS internet and the city could look into subsidizing some of these services for disadvantaged communities. So no, I am not in favor of the PA Fiber project at this moment.

If you had to prioritize funding either to upgrading our city's electrical grid to support phasing out gas including adding a second electric power line of electricity geographically redundant or having the Palo Alto Utilities provide a competing fiber to home service, which would you choose?

Per the above, I would prioritize funding to upgrade our city's electrical grid to support phasing out including adding a second electric power line of electricity geographically redundant. We NEED a secondary power source. This is a SAFETY issue, and as we deal with increasing risks of wildfires and others, we need redundancy in place, again, for the safety of our community members that may not be in a position to deal with a power shortage due to medical conditions or similar.

With the planned fiber expansion, should we fund more districts to be undergrounded?

Yes, underground.