



2022 City Council Candidate Questions

Lisa Forssell 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?

I have served on the Utilities Advisory Commission for 6 years, including 2 as chair. In my time and role on the UAC I have been an advocate for numerous policies and programs, including:

- Helped formulate Palo Alto's carbon offset program for the natural gas utility (a bridge strategy). Appeared at the Finance Committee and Council meetings when this item was being discussed.
- Co-wrote a Commissioner Memo about leaked methane and carbon accounting, helping the commission and council understand why the offset program was not a permanent solution.
- Successfully sought to change the way Palo Alto does its carbon accounting to support the claim that our electric power is 100% carbon neutral.
- In three years on the budget subcommittee, provided oversight of the 300+ million budget.
- Advocated for EV charging facilities in public spaces and multifamily housing to improve access/equity of EVs in the community
- Supported Palo Alto's move to improve recycled water quality and participate in regional efforts to recycle water.
- Advocated for grid modernization to support increased use of electric power as we transition away from natural gas.
- At the start of the pandemic, advocated to suspend utility shut offs due to inability to pay. This policy was adopted, and vulnerable residents kept their power, gas, and water service even if they were unable to pay their utility bills.

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

My three priorities are housing, transportation, and sustainability. Here are three specific goals I want to achieve.

On housing: create several specific area plans that spell out the city's vision for a mix of affordable and market rate housing development, that includes green space, bicycle and pedestrian paths, and access to amenities. Create streamlined processes that give developers predictability so they can move forward effectively. I'd like to see construction begin on several projects within four years.

On transportation: one of the most urgent things Palo Alto needs to do is create plans for grade separations at Palo Alto's four Caltrain crossings (Meadow, Charleston, Churchill, and Palo Alto Ave.) I favor the designs that increase bicycle/pedestrian safety and convenience - ideally with completely separate paths - while still offering vehicle access. City Council needs to approve a specific plan and

allocate funding. With a shovel-ready project the City can apply for state and federal funds. I'd like to see construction begin on at least two crossings within four years.

On sustainability: In Palo Alto we have a history of leadership in sustainability. What we do matters when other cities can implement similar policies, and eventually pave the way for state-wide measures. In the next four years I'd like to see 40% of households and businesses transition away from gas appliances to electric versions. The City can support this in a number of ways including providing selection and installation expertise on staff as well as with incentives, subsidies, and financing to pay for the equipment. There are federal dollars available which the City should tap into.

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

Most issues that I study, ultimately lead to our regional lack of housing as a significant root cause. Power outages? Our utility is understaffed and can't attract & retain workers because of the local cost of living. Line crews live in central California and can't respond quickly to power outages. Have trouble getting a medical appointment? Our healthcare providers are understaffed and are having trouble hiring assistants, nurses, and MD's because of the cost of living. Local businesses we depend on are having trouble paying a living wage, and have to raise prices for basics like a sandwich or a haircut, to make the business pencil out.

Not everyone that works in Palo Alto needs to live in Palo Alto. It's a regional problem. But Palo Alto needs to do its part in solving this issue.

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

I would support reasonable donation limits (eg, \$500 or \$1000) or spending limits (eg, \$30,000), or both. I have limited donations to \$2000 and would gladly lower this limit if all candidates faced the same restriction.

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?

I understand why the state passed SB 9, given that local governments across the state were not approving enough new housing to meet California's needs. SB9 is the new state law that allows a homeowner to divide their lot and build up to two units on each lot. The owner needs to live on the property. When I talk to people about SB9, the concern I hear most often is worry that their neighbors will build a tall building that encroaches on their privacy. However, SB9 does not increase height limits beyond what is already allowed. There is a fair amount of misinformation out there about SB9. I think SB9 will increase our housing supply only very gradually, because of the owner-occupied requirement. However I think it is a reasonable tool to have available for homeowners who want to tap into their home equity, provide a place for a family member to live, or generate rental income.

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

46% of Palo Alto rents. I appreciate the work of the recently formed Palo Alto Renters Association and would listen to PARA's input. Palo Alto should implement the rental registry required by a 2005 ordinance and never implemented. We need data in order to create good public policy. Palo Alto should actively educate renters about their rights, and provide free legal advice for renters who face unjust evictions. Palo Alto should not tolerate tenant harassment in any form.

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

I think we need to revisit our zoning for all levels of affordability.

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

I would consider a vacant home tax. As a first step, we need to quantify the problem. The City will need to identify the vacant homes, so we can use data to drive effective policy.

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

Developers will build what is more profitable. The City can make housing more profitable than office construction with a few techniques, including:

- De-risk housing development by making the process clear and predictable.
- Revisit density, height, and parking requirements along with affordability requirements.
- Create area plans that spell out what the City wants in new housing development, such as green space, bike/pedestrian paths, and access to amenities along with housing. Make it clear that proposals that meet the area plan will be approved.

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?

We should continue to maintain our parks. New development should include new green space, parks, trees, and plazas. I’d like to return Palo Alto Library hours to at least pre-pandemic hours of operation. Local businesses that provide items key to quality of life - groceries, drugstores, hardware, pet supplies - will benefit from additional customers as they continue to compete with Amazon and other online retailers.

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

Our most serious traffic issue is about to materialize when Caltrain starts running more frequent trains as a result of the almost-complete electrification upgrade. The gates will be closed at Meadow, Charleston, Churchill and Palo Alto Ave as often as every few minutes. It will be highly disruptive. We need to address this right away - see my “top three goals” answer above.

I want to make space on the road for those who need or want to drive, by providing alternatives to those who can’t or prefer not to drive. I want to restart the crosstown shuttle and start the on-demand shuttle that Palo Alto already has a grant for. I want to improve bicycle paths and add bicycle parking in areas that don’t have enough, including Downtown, California Ave, Midtown, and our parks.

Palo Alto could use recent technology like the Mobility Data Specification to require UPS and Amazon to operate only during non-peak traffic hours, or to require Waze and other apps to choose routes along our larger roads instead of quiet neighborhood roads.

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, along with residents, employees, and visitors are members of the community. I expect all members of the community to share responsibility for our shared resources. I support the business tax which will be on the November ballot. Some of the funds from the business tax will go toward grade separations, which will have a huge impact on our traffic flows.

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?

The City Council has a number of tools at its disposal to set policy. I intend to use them. Any two council members can author a colleagues memo and propose policy. The council chooses a Mayor who sets the agenda. Each council member gets regular 1:1 time with the city manager, and can reach out to other department heads as well. I will start with making full use of the existing powers of a council member before proposing changes.

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

I'd like to start with a pilot fiber program in a part of the city that is poorly served by the incumbents (eg AT&T, Comcast). And any new neighborhoods that are built as we expand housing options in Palo Alto, should receive municipal fiber service.

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?

My first priority is maintaining a safe, reliable, cost-effective and sustainable electric utility. We need to modernize our local electric grid, replace aging equipment, and upgrade infrastructure. This will be needed to meet the additional load that we anticipate due to increased EV charging and replacement of gas appliances with electric.

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

I'd love to see city blocks and neighborhoods undergo a modernization that includes upgrading and undergrounding the electric infrastructure, installing fiber, and potentially, removing natural gas lines. (The city would have to incentivize/subsidize/finance the electric appliances to replace the gas ones; which might be possible with federal dollars from the Inflation Reduction Act.)