



2022 City Council Candidate Questions

Ed Lauing 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 been intimately involved with Palo Alto City government for almost 13 years. I first served on the Parks and Recreation Commission for seven years, and I am now in my sixth year on the Planning and Transportation Commission.

For the last 18 months I have been co-chair of the Housing Element Working Group working on the critical priority for our city – creating new housing for the next 8 years.

- Planning and Transportation Commission (PTC): 2017 — Present. 2X Chair
- Parks and Recreation Commission (PRC): 2010 – 2016 (7 years). 3X Chair
- Housing Element Working Group (HEWG) 5/21 – Present. Co-Chair

I have played a leadership role in advancing recommendations to City Council on a wide breadth of issues. At Parks and Rec, that ranged from refurbishing parks and designing new services and amenities to strategic planning for our bike and pedestrian transportation network, our urban forest master plan, and a long-range parks and recreation master plan. At the Planning Commission it includes affordable housing, renter protections, ADU standards, long-range planning for housing, zoning changes, residential parking programs, wireless antennas, neighborhood planning and more. Finally, on the HEWG my role was to co-lead the study, debate, and development of recommendations for where 6,000+ required new housing units could be located and which policies and programs should govern that new development.

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

Expand housing for our citizens – especially the true below-market-rate segment to provide homes for lower-income residents such as teachers, public safety workers, and other service workers. I believe this is a moral imperative for Palo Alto to increase the economic and ethnic diversity of our community.

Public safety is a fundamental obligation to our residents. Increased brazen street crimes have many in the community on edge. I want to increase investment in public safety staff with effective recruiting, training, and oversight and carry forward the city's recent progress in matching appropriate responders to different public safety needs.

Climate Change can be slowed. Here in Palo Alto we should upgrade the grid and take additional practical steps to migrate to electric. This includes an active role by the city to subsidize and facilitate retrofits for appliances like electric heat pumps and water heaters for so everyone can be part of the solution.

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

Housing is my highest concern because, like climate, time is running out to course correct for truly affordable housing. But unlike for climate mitigation, Palo Alto has begun to fall below the curve. Given lead times for planning and construction of new housing, and escalating costs of construction, it will soon be nearly impossible to have rental and purchase options for low-income residents. Prices will be out of reach. Meanwhile, the penalty and incentive structure of state housing mandates overwhelmingly encourages cities to target their incentives to high-rise, market-rate, and micro-units – homes that cannot support families and are still unaffordable. The challenge is to figure out how to build required units of types and prices that meet the needs of our community - without overwhelming our neighborhoods and infrastructure,

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

The basis of local campaign financing should be full transparency of donors and a tally of the percentage of donors who are Palo Alto residents – not out of town interests. Candidates should be required to list this information on their website at agreed-to intervals along with total amount raised.

Marketing for candidates by independent expenditure committees or political parties should be reported to candidates and tallied as in-kind donations. It is not difficult to price the value of candidate mailers (\$10,000+) and currently they are not accounted for.

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?

They are state laws. Palo Alto will follow state laws.

However, I do not favor blanket, one-size-fits-all land use legislation for every city and every neighborhood in every city. Each neighborhood is wonderfully different in Palo Alto with unique traffic patterns, transportation infrastructure, mobility modes, and school locations. Blanket laws ignore these differences.

To make matters worse, as the question indicates, help from the state to act on these laws – and others - is zero dollars. Limited city staff combined with constant legislative changes makes it nearly impossible to keep up.

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

I have already analyzed and voted for many rental protections on the Planning Commission which are moving toward council approval including:

- Relocation assistance for no-fault eviction tenants in properties with >10 units.
- Rental registry in the city
- Caps on security deposits

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

I am an aggressive proponent of TRULY affordable housing – deed-restricted - to make sure rents are capped by income level. Given our shortage of below market rate units, a 100% affordable project is highly desirable. But the reduced rents on such a project mean this cannot be the dominant model because developers won't build them. An all-housing project with a mixture of housing types is more likely and feasible. This type of housing also has the advantage of not creating the appearance of AH residents being second-class citizens as all income segment residents are in the same building.

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

This issue has a lot of underlying nuance and some valid legal tentacles around private property rights. I understand the reason this has been considered in San Francisco and other communities. A vacant home is a lost housing resource in our city. I would consider this, especially for corporations and speculators, but we have to evaluate the cost, manpower and feasibility of home identification, monitoring and enforcement of what counts as a vacant home, and the desirability of a sliding scale (longer vacancy, higher tax).

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

On the Planning Commission I have worked on many projects to accomplish this in the last 5+ years. Perhaps the most important is the Housing Incentive Program (HIP). We made a detailed and concerted effort in dialogue with many parties to adjust building parameters to get more housing. Coupled with that, we opened up new areas for housing such as the San Antonio corridor in addition to the commercial zoning already there. That created a lot more space for new homes, and it has worked. We have a number of applications now for housing there.

The PTC, recently adjusted the HIP program again, and City Council just approved it.

I also think we need to keep the office caps in place to restrain any new office until the office housing imbalance is corrected.

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?

I am committed to keeping the true value and character of Palo Alto. It is a wonderful community with unique amenities. It is critical that our parks, local amenities, green infrastructure, grow along with our population. I believe CC must insist on keeping parks, open space, urban canopy, sports fields, safe bike paths, transportation and stormwater infrastructure as requirements for all neighborhoods. New neighbors want to come to Palo Alto FOR the amenities and quality of life! Developers will naturally object because land that does not have an office or home reduces a developer’s revenue. But City Council has to make this an essential and ongoing part of our urban planning.

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

Most serious traffic issue:

- Too much commute traffic on main arteries

How to fix?

- TDM with teeth and oversight
- Better, safer bike paths and use of other micro transportation vehicles
- Housing and jobs near public transit and add to public transit, including local shuttle
- Encourage work-from-home to reduce commuter traffic
- Build affordable housing to make it easier for workers to live here and not commute.

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?

Yes.

- Commercial employers should manage TDM programs and subsidize public transit for employees. They could even subsidize two-wheel vehicle commutes.
- They should pay their fair share to support the TMA (Transportation Management Association).
- In addition to helping reduce commutes via SOVs (Single Occupancy Vehicles) they should purchase parking permits in off-street lots to accommodate a sizable percentage of their actual parking demand.

The City's role, in consultation with the business community, is to define the parameters of what is required for what type/size of business and to develop and implement enforcement mechanisms.

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?

There is sufficient "balance of power" in the current structure. Council Members run the city. They do it by hiring the City Manager and directing the City Manager on the policies and projects they want accomplished. Our current structure runs much like a business where the Council members are the board of directors and the City Manager is the CEO. Technically, by charter, all the board (Council) can do is hire and fire the CEO (City Manager) who is an employee of the city reporting to the board. But in practice this is much more of a strong partnership to address the city's issues.

It is up to the Council to oversee how its policy framework is implemented by the City Manager. If dissatisfied, direction should be clarified and corrections made. City Manager performance evaluations should be robust, specifically identify any need for improvement, and lead to a corrective work plan as appropriate. The City Manager serves until the Council decides differently.

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

I lean toward yes. Who wouldn't want to untether from Comcast! If our residents get better reliability and lower price, that is highly appealing and polls on user interest appear to be high. But the upfront cost also is high. And I question if the city should really step up and manage another utility – especially at the investment level required.

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?

The grid upgrade is expensive and essential. It gets top priority.

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

No. While I would love to get rid of our overhead wires (for both safety and aesthetic reasons), this is not an opportunity we should jump on. 1) Even if undergrounding of fiber is underway the **additional** cost to transition other utilities to underground is very expensive and not the right funding priority. 2) This likely would require a lengthy extension of massive disruption in neighborhoods during the construction period.