



# 2022 City Council Candidate Questions

## Vicki Veenker 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?**

Experience with Community Issues

- For almost 20 years, I had children in the Palo Alto public schools, so I am familiar with issues related to safe routes to schools
- For 10 years, my parents were in senior residences in the city, so I am familiar with the challenges seniors face here
- For the last 30 years, I have participated through my church in downtown Palo Alto with efforts to provide food, clothing and shelter for the unhoused, including through the Food Closet and Hotel de Zink
- I served on the Board of Directors of WIREfor Women and the Advisory Board of FundHer to support women running for local public office
- Both of our daughters were highly involved in youth sports and made regular use of city sports fields and courts, and our entire family made regular use of city libraries, so we are familiar with issues related to both.

Experience with City government

- I served on the Board of the Law Foundation of Silicon Valley during the five years when we represented the residents of the Buena Vista mobile home park and appeared in council chambers during meetings where council made decisions that ended up saving it
- I worked with current members of Council and City staff to launch the first ever Sibling Cities USA partnership with Bloomington, Indiana; I am the founder of SCUSA and helped prepare the proposal and resolution creating the relationship. The two cities have already shared best practices regarding destination marketing, public art, parks, economic development, and more.
- I recently spoke at a Council meeting in support of the Safe Parking Program proposed for my neighborhood.

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

1. Fighting climate change and accelerating progress toward our climate goals
2. Restoring and improving city services, such as libraries, police, and parks
3. Increase affordable and economically diverse housing, including for families

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

Housing in Palo Alto is a big and complex issue that intersects with many others like transportation, city services, climate, and economic development. Palo Altans are divided on how to address the issue, holding a wide range of views. There is some consensus that we need more housing, especially affordable housing, to have a balanced community. However, we do not have a common vision on how we get there, in other words, what good growth looks like. I have a track record of bringing people together on tough issues. I am a mediator for the federal courts and the US International Trade Commission and I've convened opposing Sacramento policymakers to create a plan to rein in healthcare costs that became law this year. I hope I can assist our city in coming together to find a way forward on housing.

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

I would support mandatory campaign finance contribution limits in local races as well as commonsense policy that increases the transparency around independent expenditures unaffiliated with candidates. While the contribution limit in this race is \$4900, I have taken a voluntary contribution cap of \$1,000.

## **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 generally oppose the state mandating that our City make expenditures without the state providing associated funding. In the case of SB 10 we can avoid this problem because the City maintains local control. The law allows cities the option of choosing to upzone in transit-rich or infill areas, in which case they avoid CEQA processes for the rezoning (however, the approval of actual projects may still be subject to CEQA). But ultimately, the decision regarding whether to upzone at all remains with the city. With SB 9, the state effectively transfers to the residents the decision as to whether to split a lot or build a duplex. If an application is filed by a resident who attests that s/he will live on the lot for at least the next three years, and it meets certain other criteria, the city must approve it. While the city must allow the split, the city is not the party obligated to build the housing and incur the associated costs.

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

- I am proud to have served on the Board of Directors of the Law Foundation of Silicon Valley for twenty years, and am a former President of the Board. The Law Foundation provides a range of legal services to low income families, including renter protection services to tenants facing wrongful eviction or housing discrimination, and legal support for renter organizing. During my tenure, the Law Foundation provided free legal representation for five years to the tenants of the Buena Vista mobile home park in Palo Alto and succeeded in saving this source of affordable housing, and the community who calls it home.
- Additionally, I support the existing renter registry/survey program in Palo Alto but believe more can be done to expand its capabilities. For example, it could track rents/rent increases (to ensure compliance with AB1482's rent cap), eviction notices (so we can see how many are occurring and where), and type of property owner (how many units are privately owned vs. corporate ownership).

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

Upzoning only for 100% affordable housing would be an incentive for developers to build this type of housing. We will need some all-affordable housing projects in order to meet our affordable housing goals. However, there remains the challenge of paying for affordable housing. Also, the state requires that we build market rate housing, too. To do this, Palo Alto has previously upzoned for other than 100% affordable and will likely need to do so again to meet the state RHNA numbers. Thoughtful upzoning for housing in designated areas is preferable to imposing dense housing in or directly adjacent to low density neighborhoods. Also, upzoning for housing in commercial areas may be preferable to office development in those areas, even if it is not 100% affordable. Lastly, market rate housing has inclusionary percentages which are not as high as all affordable but they add to our affordable stock and do not segregate residents by income levels.

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

I would support a policy that taxes "ghost houses" via a vacant home tax. Houses should shelter people, not assets. I have made inquiries to determine how big of a problem this is in Palo Alto and have been unable to find out. Quantifying the problem would help us in crafting a tax.

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

I support policies slowing the rate of office development to reduce our jobs:housing imbalance, such as the two office growth caps that Palo Alto has put in place in recent years.

## **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 care deeply about our community where my husband and I have lived for 30 years and our daughters have benefited from exceptional schools, beautiful parks, and an innovation culture unique in all the world. Despite our many assets, Palo Alto is falling short of its potential with cut backs in a wide array of city services, including reduced library hours. Libraries promote equity and are a beloved common space where all can gather regardless of income, race, ethnicity, or other considerations. They promote learning and support those seeking advancement, free of cost. Families often enjoy them together. Yet none of our libraries are open on Sunday and most are closed for 2-4 days per week, including our beloved Children's Library.

I'll work to address budgeting, revenue, and other issues that stand in the way of greater access for all residents to libraries, parks, and other community assets that enhance our quality of life. These are important for new and old residents alike. Together we can be a successful and welcoming community for the marvelously diverse residents who enrich Palo Alto.

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

First is our four at-grade (street level) rail crossings. They are dangerous to people on the tracks and they cause significant traffic back-ups. We should focus on eliminating at-grade crossings to improve safety and reduce gridlock, especially given that electrification of Caltrain will increase train trips during peak commute times. We need to separate trains and other modes of transportation, such as cars, bikes and pedestrians.

Second, we need to continue to improve bikeways and bike safety to reduce car trips for those who are willing and able to bike. Part of this should be improving bike and pedestrian connections across Alma and the train tracks as a precursor to the grade separation efforts described above.

**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 share responsibility for reducing the traffic and parking impacts they bring to the city every day. One step in the right direction is the business tax which will support funding for eliminating at-grade rail crossings and will support full police staffing, including police traffic patrols.

In addition, businesses have been paying parking assessments to fund parking garages and parking permits have funded a Transportation Demand Management fund. Similarly, new downtown garage expansion could be paid for by businesses via in lieu parking assessments and Parking Assessment District funding. In addition, we could re-establish the Cal Ave Parking Assessment District.

**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 role of the city council is to set policy and exercise oversight of the city government, much as a board of directors does. I have served on a number of non-profit boards. The best results are achieved when the roles are clear, communication is good, and there is a mutually respectful relationship. The role of council members is to provide direction to the city manager and staff, oversee their operations, and ensure that they are responsive to council direction. Staff in turn should use their expertise to make recommendations and operationalize council decisions.

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

Yes. I agree with the City that creating Palo Alto Fiber would provide faster resolution times and service excellence, competitive pricing to customers, and it keeps dollars local. Public investment in broadband infrastructure should also create competition, improving services and keeping costs down. Providing locally owned high-speed internet allows the City to retain and attract companies, further developing a diverse and robust local economy.

**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?**

This is not a choice that the city should face. The funding for fiber to the premise is planned to come through accumulated profits from the Commercial Fiber fund.

My understanding is that phasing out gas is not dependent on a second redundant electric power line. Upgrading the capacity of our grid for electrification of transportation and buildings is not constrained by the size of the current power line. That said, a separate power line is an important consideration for the city to improve resiliency and function as a back-up for our electric supply rather than to meet capacity needs.

While I don't think we have to choose, if forced, I would choose upgrading our power grid.

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

Fiber would be undergrounded from the start. Generally it's a good idea to underground utilities: not only is it safer, but it also reduces the chances of those utilities going offline in case of a heat emergency, storm or earthquake. I'm not clear whether the question is asking whether we should simultaneously underground electric power or other utilities when we trench for fiber. If so, I am not sure if the two are compatible; there is a possibility that microtrenching will be used for fiber.