



2024 City Council Candidate Questions

George Lu Responses

EXPERIENCE

What experience with Palo Alto community issues would you bring to the council?

I currently serve as a Planning and Transportation Commissioner, where I've worked on key issues like our Housing Element, El Camino Bike Lanes, and retail streamlining.

As a Peninsula native, I've studied, visited, worked, and lived in Palo Alto over two decades. I grew up coming to Palo Alto for Chinese school and visiting friends Downtown. Later on, I studied Economics at Stanford and worked at a Palo Alto startup.

In my professional career, I've worked closely on civic issues. At Bird, I enabled millions of electric scooter rides around the world, while building equity programs to improve affordable access. During the Pandemic, I volunteered full-time at the US Digital Response, implementing a state-funded food aid program from local restaurants to seniors in need across nearly a dozen cities.

GOALS

What do you see as the biggest problems facing Palo Alto and how would you address them?

Housing Affordability. Teachers, first responders, young families, and seniors need to be able to live in Palo Alto. Building more housing at all income levels is the best way to support our schools, reduce our climate impact, and build a more inclusive community. I will vote for housing, push for responsive neighborhood planning, and advance tenant protections.

Safe Streets. Palo Alto regularly sees preventable traffic accidents and deaths. We must commit to a Vision Zero goal, and have a strong mandate to prioritize safety. Otherwise, we will continue to see infrastructure projects languish for reasons ranging from aesthetic concerns to lack of funding. I will push for infrastructure, education, and traffic enforcement.

Supporting Local Business. Palo Alto has uniquely burdensome requirements for small businesses, and has been slow to recover since the pandemic. I will push for code simplifications (zoning, permitting, parklets, etc.) to remove delay, costs, and uncertainty. I will invest in our streetscapes, and make sure our retail corridors are clean, safe, and inviting, with events and programming for all .

Do you have any interests, such as ties to Stanford or other entities that would cause you to recuse yourself on issues that are before the council? If so, what are they?

I own a condo (my primary residence) near California Ave and North Ventura, which has forced me to recuse myself from some issues on the Planning and Transportation Commission.

HOUSING

What does the term “affordable housing” mean to you?

Housing is affordable when it costs <30% of a household’s gross income. However, I don’t want to muddy the waters: “Affordable Housing” should be considered affordable to people earning <80% of Area Median Income, though this could be higher for ownership projects.

Of course, we are a privileged community, with high incomes. More broadly, lower-case “a” affordable housing needs to work for teachers, firefighters, police, and normal families who earn more than 80% of median income. This is how we move the needle against displacement, push back against increasing rents, and become a more inclusive city.

Four proposed developments along El Camino will create about 1100 new housing units, with only 15-20% of these being below-market-rate housing.

- **How are we to meet HCD’s requirement for low-income housing by requiring only such a low percentage?**

Firstly, there’s strong evidence that mixed-income housing improves social outcomes for families and children who live in these communities. We should embrace a spectrum of affordability levels in new developments, though push (and potentially subsidize) to maximize affordability.

That said, we need to pursue 100% affordable developments as aggressively as we can with investments of land, such as city owned parking lots and increased funding, complemented by accelerated permitting.

I’m proud to be supported by non-profit housing leaders, and I live directly next to a Midpen complex for adults with developmental disabilities. We need to clear waitlists and get more affordable housing across the entire city.

- **How do we ensure units will include a range of bedrooms, so they are feasible for families?**

Family housing is critical for our school enrollment, and overall sense of vitality as a city. We need to roll out incentives, such as streamlining or zoning flexibility, to make sure there are strong incentives to build 3+ bedroom homes.

Townhomes are an important opportunity for family housing. We need to modernize zoning, so that townhomes are more feasible in our multifamily and transition zones (from 20 to 40 units per acre).

In some part, we see a focus on large developments in Palo Alto because it takes so much risk, cost, and expertise to build housing here, that it doesn’t make sense to prioritize smaller townhome or apartment projects. We need to prioritize and enable community-scale housing throughout the city.

The city’s housing element has almost 2000 houses in the San Antonio corridor. What is the most significant (new) policy that will increase housing in Palo Alto? Other than in the San Antonio corridor, where else should we look for housing?

On San Antonio, there are good opportunities, but we should also recognize that the city needed to start a planning process years ago. We have to plan for a park, among other improvements (discussed further below) as soon as possible.

On policy, we need to zone for housing outcomes, but most importantly we need to streamline housing across the board. We should look at the success of Los Angeles’ streamlining (Executive

Directive 1), which is producing tens of thousands of 100% affordable privately-funded housing units, and learn what can be applied here.

On locations for housing, the best housing is transit-oriented. We need to look to Downtown, Cal Ave, and El Camino, and in particular look at surface parking lots (which could be replaced with mixed-use buildings with parking). We must also push Stanford hard to get more housing in the Research Park and Shopping Center.

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

I am excited to see the rollout of our new rental registry program. We've had a version of the rental registry in the books since 2002, which was never seriously implemented.

We have to show a commitment to renters, who consist of almost 50% of Palo Alto residents but aren't properly heard. I support increased penalties for negligent landlords, anti-rent-gouging measures, just cause protections, increased notice for significant rent increases, subsidized legal counsel, and discrimination protections.

RETAIL

What is your position on ground floor retail? Should it be eliminated? Should permitted uses be revised? And should any changes apply to just downtown and Cal Ave or neighborhood centers as well?

Ground floor retail is critical, and there is no world where we should consider eliminating it. The answer is to expand retail through incentivizing mixed-use retail and housing.

I joined the Planning Commission, and I am running in large part because I want retail to succeed. I care about getting energy in our streets, and supporting a diversity of businesses.

That said, we do need to become more flexible as a city. We have strong protections for retail on University, Cal Ave, and Midtown, but need to allow retail to evolve. For example, extremely rigid retail preservation ordinances on El Camino can contribute to blight.

It's also important to expand permitted uses. On Cal Ave for example, we effectively don't permit new hair salons, nail salons, tutoring centers, many fitness facilities, etc.. At a time where there are so many vacancies pulling energy from the street, we should be liberalizing our rules to enable more demand.

What are your ideas to help local small businesses, especially those that serve neighborhoods, to survive and thrive?

We need to invest in our streetscapes. Cal Ave and Downtown are first class public spaces that should be treated as such, with wide sidewalks, public art, and more nature built into the street. Midtown and El Camino need even more basic investments, like cleanliness and walkable sidewalks.

Beyond physical investments, I've heard so many horror stories from small business owners. We simply have to be more responsive. When the Aquarius Theater wanted to sell beer, the permit process took 14 months and required submission of expensive architectural diagrams. In contrast, Santa Monica simplified rules to essentially allow existing food-serving businesses to serve alcohol by right last year.

While we are making investments in streamlining, we have to push further and copy good ideas from cities like Santa Monica and San Francisco.

Given that there are many empty retail business locations, would you support a retail business vacancy tax for properties that have been vacant for more than 1 year?

We should consider all carrots and sticks, but I don't support vacancy taxes now.

There are strong headwinds to retail, such as loss of office workers, rise of online shopping, interest rates, and high construction costs. Some retail buildings are already stripped down to a shell, but would cost over a million dollars to renovate.

A vacancy tax doesn't change the incentives that prevent both businesses and landlords from making these investments. In the immediate term, the most important thing we can do is make it less risky and expensive to fill a vacancy, and make sure that the street is safe, clean, and ready for business.

COMMUNITY LIFE

What two things would you prioritize to make Palo Alto and its neighborhoods more livable?

In addition to supporting housing, retail, and walking / cycling improvements, we should also:

1. Invest in nature, including parks and our tree canopy, especially in South Palo Alto.
2. Support community-led events ranging from small block parties to larger cultural celebrations to regular events like Third Thursday on Cal Ave.

What is your vision for the Cubberley site?

Cubberley is an essential community resource. My highest priority is that we maintain or expand the access and use by community organizations. We should generally prioritize open fields for recreation, as well as expanded arts programs.

As a matter of fairness, we need to invest significantly in Cubberley to bring more resources and opportunities to South Palo Alto.

Do you support any housing on the Cubberley site? If so, housing for whom?

Housing is not a priority for me on Cubberley. While I care deeply about housing and believe in mixed-use, there are other opportunities to build housing in the city. There aren't many opportunities to create large community spaces.

We should prioritize great public space for the entire community.

TRANSPORTATION/TRAFFIC

The City wants people to use their cars less, yet not everyone can or wants to travel by bicycle and we have few public transportation options. How would you reorient traffic in our city?

Firstly, we need awareness of existing public transit options. We have excellent bus service along El Camino, and pooled rides via Palo Alto Link. These are safe, convenient, and affordable options that we need to grow and strengthen.

Secondly, we should focus our growth in a transit oriented way, so people who choose not to drive have viable options. We should also invest in proven best practices, like traffic demand management plans for employers and schools. Providing transit passes in these contexts can help traffic.

I fully acknowledge that cars will always have a place in Palo Alto. However, we should still strive to be a more human-scale, tight-knit community with walkability and cyclability for every neighborhood.

In addition to Palo's Alto's plan for the San Antonio/Charleston area, Charleston Plaza in Mt View is planning a development that will bring hundreds of vehicle trips to the same area, which is already severely stressed. What mitigation measures can and should be done?

We need real neighborhood planning on San Antonio. We need to do this in partnership with Mountain View, but most importantly we need to do this quickly after our latest effort at neighborhood planning took 7 years (<https://www.paloaltoonline.com/news/2024/05/09/after-seven-years-ventura-growth-plan-nears-finish-line/>).

We should work with VTA to provide high-quality bus service. We also need to make sure there's good cycling connections to offices across 101 and other communities within Palo Alto. At a state-level, we should lobby and advance plans to upgrade the highway interchange at San Antonio, which has clear bottlenecks.

Regarding Grade Separation, what is your personal design preference (underpass, hybrid, trench, etc) for each of the three locations?

For Churchill, I'd prefer closing the street, with further analysis of options to support capacity along Page Mill and Embarcadero. While the option to develop a partial underpass is reasonable, closure is much less expensive, avoids eminent domain, and better serves Paly students and cyclists.

On Meadow and Charleston, I prefer the hybrid approach. This is likely fiscally responsible, avoids eminent domain, and is more intuitive to pedestrians and cyclists. This is a standard solution across other cities for a reason.

Ultimately, there is no perfect option. We need to develop clearer engineering plans, but we actually need to move forward. Years of discussion have resulted in less feasible and more expensive plans, and we should strive to benefit generations of Palo Altans on both transportation and safety.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Anything else you'd like the residents to know?

I'm honored to have the endorsement of 18 current and former Councilmembers and School Board members.

I live in the Mayfield neighborhood. We have a beautiful and lively neighborhood, with a variety of small and large multi-family developments. I hear residents' concerns about potential erosion of community and character. I invite everyone to take a walk with me through the neighborhood, and see the diversity and tree canopy (and parking) that are available here.

I believe that we *can* build more housing to meet an acute need in our community, while improving the quality of life for all.

Please reach out at georgeforpaloalto@gmail.com, and find more about my campaign at www.georgeforpaloalto.com.