



## **2024 City Council Candidate Questions**

### **Keith Reckdahl Responses**

#### **EXPERIENCE**

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

I've served as a Commissioner for Palo Alto for 12 years and I'm honored to have received the endorsement of the Sierra Club for my focus on housing and the environment. I have nine years of experience serving on Palo Alto's Parks and Recreation Committee, where I played a key role in shaping the Parks Master Plan. During my tenure, I focused on addressing the community's evolving needs by promoting sustainability, reducing water usage, limiting harmful chemicals, and creating outreach programs for teens, seniors, and underserved groups. I also advocated for enhanced recreational facilities and park accessibility for all residents.

Currently, I serve as Vice Chair of the Planning and Transportation Commission, where I've worked over the past three years to improve transportation options for cars, bikes, and pedestrians of all ages and abilities. I've been involved in developing solutions for critical transportation issues, such as eliminating railroad crossings and advocating for accessible retail to support local businesses.

I have also been actively involved in housing policy, serving on the Housing Element Working Group and the North Ventura Coordinated Area Plan. My focus has been on advocating for affordable housing while ensuring that new developments provide the same quality amenities, such as parks and bike lanes, that current residents enjoy. While serving on the Planning and Transportation Commission, I also led the campaign for Measure K, which secured funding for public safety, affordable housing, and transportation improvements in Palo Alto.

I've spent over 25 years as an aerospace engineer leading complex projects to get them delivered on time and on budget. With a background in Mechanical Engineering, and holding a Ph.D. from Stanford, I bring a rigorous, analytical approach to problem-solving. My education and experience in city planning, housing, and transportation make me well-qualified to contribute effectively to the City Council, ensuring our community remains livable and vibrant for all.

I've lived in Palo Alto for 28 years and I care deeply about this community. My wife, Becky Epstein, and I have raised our kids here where they attended Palo Alto Schools (Ohlone, JLS, Gunn) and played team sports. I want to focus on Palo Alto, so I've committed to not run for higher office.

#### **GOALS**

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

The largest issue facing the City is how to implement the City's Housing Element, particularly how to get the planned 6000 housing units actually built. The zoning changes have been implemented, but the planning for any additional parks or infrastructure must be performed now before the potential sites are developed, preventing the construction of the parks/infrastructure.

Affordable housing is another challenge. Palo Alto's RNHA allocation includes over 3400 units for Moderate Income and below, with over 2400 of these being Low Income and below. Since

inclusionary units will be insufficient to meet this allocation, the City must subsidize many of these affordable units, either by using City funds, government grants, or partnering with nonprofit housing groups. Palo Alto's Measure K does provide some affordable housing funding, but the City must develop additional funding sources.

It will be difficult to build 6000 housing units without making traffic worse. To help mitigate congestion, we must provide residents with high-quality transportation options, particularly bike and mass transit. Every person who uses a bike or bus is one less driver competing with the people who cannot bike/bus. The City's Bicycle and Pedestrian Transportation Plan Update, which is currently underway, will improve the safety and convenience of biking and walking. We must collaborate with VTA to boost bus ridership, as increased use leads to more frequent service, creating a positive cycle that further encourages ridership. We should also bring back the City's shuttle and/or collaborate with Stanford to extend and improve their Marguerite shuttle.

Both University Avenue and California Avenue areas are experiencing high retail vacancies, which are being addressed by both the Planning & Transportation Commission (PTC) and the Council's Retail Ad Hoc. The City must prioritize streetscape improvements in our retail area and also enact the PTC recommendations to streamline zoning. We also need to collaborate with our local merchants to better understand how the City can improve its retail areas.

Climate change is a significant long-term risk for the City. Worsening rain storms will aggravate stream flooding, hotter and drier weather increases wildfire severity, and sea level rise will threaten significant parts of Palo Alto. We must aggressively continue our Sustainability and Climate Action Plan (S/CAP), prioritize the Newell and Pope-Chaucer bridge work, and improve both our fire mitigation and evacuation plans in the foothills areas.

**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?**

No.

## HOUSING

**What does the term "affordable housing" mean to you?**

"Affordable housing" means dwellings that reasonably fit within a household's budget. This is typically defined as housing costing no more than 30% of a household's gross income, covering expenses like rent or mortgage payments, utilities, and related costs.

The concept of affordability is tied to the Area Median Income (AMI), with different income groups qualifying for various levels of affordable housing. These groups include:

- extremely low-income (up to 30% of AMI)
- very low-income (30-50% of AMI)
- low-income (50-80% of AMI)
- moderate-income (80-120% of AMI)

**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?**

We cannot meet our Housing and Community Development (HCD) goals through inclusionary zoning alone. As we've done historically, much of our low-income housing will need to come from

100% affordable projects in partnership with nonprofit developers and through Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs). The City must develop additional revenue sources to fund this affordable housing.

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

Both developer profitability and the RHNA unit allocation encourage the development of small units. The Housing Element identified the lack of family-sized units as a shortcoming of Palo Alto's housing production and thus included a program to research and implement incentives to encourage larger units, including Floor Area Ratio exemptions for units with three or more bedrooms. A more blunt approach would be to explicitly mandate that new housing developments include a variety of unit sizes, although the state may interpret that as impeding housing development.

When the City helps fund affordable developments, we have more control over the distribution of unit sizes. We should encourage affordable housing providers to offer a variety of unit sizes to better accommodate the diverse needs of families seeking affordable housing.

**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?**

I support housing along the El Camino corridor, California Avenue, and University Avenue, as these areas are walkable and bikeable and also have good access to transit.

I also support collaborating with Stanford to develop additional housing in the Stanford Research Park and the Stanford Shopping Center area, as proximity to Stanford and Research Park employment will make that housing attractive to the nearby employees, potentially reducing traffic.

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

In recent years many renters experienced real hardships from some landlords. That's why my work on the Housing Element and the Planning and Transportation Commission included developing strong renter protections, including limits on security deposits and relocation assistance when leases are terminated without cause. While renter protection is critical, we must carefully balance our programs to keep Palo Alto a desirable community for constructing new rental housing.

The Housing Element upzoning was limited to parcels with older buildings in order to maximize the likelihood of development. Unfortunately, these older buildings house most of Palo Alto's naturally affordable housing units. This means that the Housing Element upzoning will replace much of our less-expensive housing with newer, more-expensive housing. Apart from inclusionary housing units and in-lieu fees, these new developments will not replace the existing naturally affordable units.

When landlords break existing leases to construct new developments, the tenants can now receive relocation assistance. The City could additionally require landlords to give the current tenants priority for rentals in the new development, but that isn't necessarily desirable since that would require them to find temporary housing during construction and also pay the higher post-construction rent.

## **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 vital, not just in our downtowns, but in all parts of the city because it allows neighbors to walk and bike to meet their retail needs. I do not believe Ground Floor retail should be

eliminated, instead the existing retail rules must be updated to allow greater flexibility but still retain the resident-serving retail that brings needed vibrancy to our city.

Unlike some other candidates, I oppose abolishing the Retail Preservation Ordinance, as its elimination would convert our ground-floor retail to tech offices, which would damage our retail environment by both reducing retail foot traffic and further increasing retail rents. A far better option is to selectively expand the permitted uses to include other resident-serving businesses, which may not provide the same foot traffic as traditional retail but would be more beneficial than general office.

As the City focuses on building density in Palo Alto, we must plan for nearby retail that serves those new residents, such as groceries and general merchandise.

El Camino and our neighborhood centers are different environments than California Ave and University Avenue. Many of the changes may be appropriate for both, but we cannot blindly apply changes citywide.

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

Before the City can improve the business environment, the Council and PTC must be fully aware of the business community's issues. The City must perform outreach to help merchants organize themselves and then hold regular meaningful discussions with the merchants and other business organizations. Monthly or quarterly roundtable meetings between City Council members, the Chamber, and local business leaders to discuss current challenges, opportunities, and city initiatives can provide a platform for open dialogue and feedback, but they're most effective if the business organizations have identified common ground they can advocate for together.

The California Avenue streetscape redesign is long overdue. This is a source of frustration for both the merchants and the general public. The Council must prioritize its engagement and move the project efficiently through the planning process. If elected, I will emphasize the importance of adhering to project timelines for both the design and construction. I will request regular updates to ensure progress is being made, with staff providing written updates that clearly detail milestone status, challenges faced, and expected completion timeline.

I will also regularly visit local businesses to understand their needs and challenges firsthand and also build better personal relationships with business owners. The City's communication channels must keep the business community informed about city policies, upcoming projects, and opportunities for engagement. And, when things go well, I'd like to implement programs that recognize and celebrate successful or innovative businesses in the community, which can enhance their visibility and contribute to a supportive business environment.

Implementing the Housing Element, increasing the number of housing units and therefore increasing nearby residents will also increase a neighborhood's foot traffic, supporting the retail environment and making the area feel more vibrant. To speed this development, the City must prioritize the neighborhood planning now, so that any subsequent building permits can be approved and issued efficiently and promptly. I will advocate for regular meetings with the business community and retailers to get targeted feedback to meet this goal.

### **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?**

Vacancies are a significant problem, particularly in our two downtown areas. However, to avoid unintended consequences, I would want to carefully investigate any untested new policy like a vacancy tax before it is implemented.

For example, we must ensure that the area's permitted uses do not include any undesirable retail types that might not improve the retail environment. The one-year time frame does seem short, but

we also need to consider details such as whether a rental to a short-term pop-up would reset the vacancy timeline.

The ideal situation would be to work with the business community to enhance the retail environment, reducing vacancies without implementing a vacancy tax.

## **COMMUNITY LIFE**

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

I would like to see more neighborhood events that bring neighbors closer together. I think increasing funding for Neighborhood block grants is a good way to foster block parties and other events that allow folks to get to know each other.

I'd also like to increase funding to programs for our youth and seniors. We have some wonderful programming but many things fill up quickly. I would like to see more availability to serve all interested participants.

### **What is your vision for the Cubberley site?**

Cubberley's age and condition makes it insufficient for today's needs. Since the City is required to add 6000 housing units over the next 8 years, it is even more crucial that Cubberley be rebuilt to support the recreational and cultural needs for our growing population. Many important facilities such as non-profits and art, music, dance, and gymnastics studios currently are located in older buildings in less-expensive parts of the City. The upzoning associated with the Housing Element will displace many of these tenants, making a rebuilt Cubberley even more critical to our community.

The gathering spaces provided by a Community Center not only allow non-profits and other organizations to provide essential services for the community, they also provide an important social outlet for the volunteers. These volunteer experiences improve the mental health of the volunteers but also foster the connections that help weave the community's social fabric.

The City does not currently have the money to support a complete rebuilding of Cubberley. The design of the new Cubberley must anticipate that it likely will need a voter-approved bond and that it may be constructed in phases, so that each phase can be functional and attractive by itself but also can easily integrate with future phases.

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

No, Cubberley needs to have long-term capacity to serve our growing population.

While subsidized housing for teachers and other public workers is a good idea, I believe that Cubberley should be dedicated to serving our growing population, not housing it.

## **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?**

Bike lanes and other non-vehicle options do not just benefit bikers, they benefit everyone by reducing vehicle congestion. This makes vehicle travel more feasible for those who cannot bike. Increasing the number and quality of non-vehicle options will increase the number of drivers who choose not to drive.

We need to enhance public transportation by collaborating with regional transit agencies to expand service and improve frequency. This includes more shuttles within the city and connecting with nearby cities and transit hubs, making public transport a more viable option for everyone.

We should focus on creating safer, more convenient, and accessible alternatives for all residents, such as improved pedestrian pathways and bikeways, including shared options like electric scooters or e-bikes. These could offer flexibility for short trips without needing to rely on cars.

We should implement smart traffic management technologies to optimize traffic flow, reduce bottlenecks, and improve the overall driving experience for those who need to use cars.

By giving people more choices in how they move around the city, we can reduce congestion, lower emissions, and make travel more efficient and inclusive.

**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?**

The San Antonio/Charleston area is currently not well served by VTA, but development of that area will create significant mass transit demand. Palo Alto and Mountain View need to work with VTA now to plan for the needs of the future development.

The proximity of the San Antonio/Charleston area to the dense North Bayshore employment means that many residents will be working just across Highway 101 from their homes. We need to work with Mountain View to add quality bike/ped lanes to Rengstorff Avenue, to increase the safety and convenience of non-vehicle transportation.

Furthermore, Palo Alto and Mountain View should encourage Google and other North Bayshore employers to route their shuttles across 101 to serve both employee commutes and also to provide their employees access to the future west-side retail.

Much of the traffic on East Charleston is headed towards the southbound 101 ramp. Palo Alto and Mountain View need to pressure CalTrans to expedite their plans to update the San Antonio/101 bridge to incorporate a ramp directly from San Antonio to southbound 101, reducing East Charleston traffic.

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

I served on the Community Advisory Panel for grade separations so I'm well aware of the options and how difficult the choices will be. Provided its property acquisitions can be reduced, I favor the underpass for Meadow/Charleston for two main reasons: 1) it allows bikes and pedestrians to be fully separated from Alma, which would make things much safer, particularly for kids on bikes, and 2) because the Underpass is the only alternative that would actually improve the traffic at the intersections because it would remove the signal interruption by bikes and pedestrians. Before making any decision, the existing very preliminary conceptual designs need significant refinement including reduced property acquisitions and better bike/ped implementation.

For Churchill, I think we need to wait. There are a variety of improvements that can be made in the interim such as quad-gates that can help with incursions, improved fencing, and improved track security measures. But the need for a grade separation at Churchill is a very low priority for the City at this time.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

### Anything else you'd like the residents to know?

In addition to spending the last 12 years on City commissions, I have spent extensive time on working groups for the Fry's redevelopment, Railroad grade separation, and constructing the Housing Element. I also ran the 2022 Measure K business tax campaign. Those experiences have given me a deep understanding of the City government, which will allow me to be productive immediately on Council.

My experience on the Fry's redevelopment is that our community's need for housing can entice planners to cut corners and ignore the livability for our new residents. **We are not just warehousing people, we must create neighborhoods with the same walkable retail, parks, bike lanes and other amenities that the rest of Palo Alto enjoys.** We cannot have two Palo Altos: a good one for existing residents and an inferior one for new residents.

Some have suggested that the City perform an Area Plan to improve our new San Antonio area. While I support the spirit of that suggestion, the people like me who worked on the Fry's Area Plan (NVCAP) now understand the limitations of the Area Plan process. We must learn from our NVCAP mistakes to avoid repeating them at San Antonio.

We must understand that our recently accepted Housing Element is not the end of our housing responsibilities, it is the just beginning. We must work with developers to implement our planning housing, while also looking for additional housing sites. We must be working now with Stanford to negotiate housing in the Stanford Research Park and at the Stanford Shopping Center. Those properties are owned by Stanford but leased to other companies. We must convince Stanford that it is in everyone's best interest to incentivize the leaseholders to cooperate with incorporation of housing.

I am entirely focused on serving Palo Alto. I have no aspirations for higher office, so I will make decisions with Palo Alto residents in mind, rather than thinking about how it might benefit my next political campaign. Because I've run a grassroots campaign with 100% of the donations coming from within Palo Alto, I don't have any loyalties to outside donors.