

2026 City Council Candidate Questions

Rail Crossings

What outcome do you support for Palo Alto's rail crossings, and what tradeoffs are you willing—and unwilling—to accept regarding cost, neighborhood impacts, road closures, eminent domain, construction disruption and urban design? At what point should the City decide that a particular grade-separation alternative is simply too expensive?

BRYNA CHANG

We need to be realistic about what is and is not possible for grade separation at Palo Alto's four rail crossings given that funding is the major barrier. At a minimum cost of ~\$500M per crossing, it would require ~\$2B to achieve complete grade separation throughout the city. Discussion about grade separation has often made it seem like it is imminent and that it could be achieved in a matter of a few years. In reality, even if we had fully engineered plans today, the construction time alone for one grade separation is 4-5 years.

Currently, it appears that we have enough Measure B funds to complete one crossing. Beyond that, unless the state or federal government provides funding, it seems unlikely that we will be able to achieve grade separation at more than one crossing. I believe we should prioritize the grade separation at the crossings that have the most traffic and accidents/deaths, which means the priority would be Charleston, Meadow, Churchill, and then Palo Alto Ave. This means that likely, the underpass at Charleston would be our one funded crossing for the foreseeable future.

At the same time, at-grade crossings are dangerous, and only become more so if ridership and service frequency increase. Palo Alto needs to do what we can to make sure we have plans ready should funding materialize. This means that if we can secure grant funding to continue designing plans for crossings at all four crossings, we should continue to do so. In the meantime, we should aggressively pursue options that increase safety and quality of life, such as quad gates and cameras/sensors for increased safety and quiet zones to eliminate train horns.

Tradeoffs I am willing to accept: construction disruption over a defined period; some road configuration changes if they produce a meaningfully better long-term outcome; the use of eminent domain if it results in a meaningfully better outcome in terms of reductions in cost, construction time, and construction disruptions.

Tradeoffs I am unwilling to accept: Dividing our city with a wall or berm along the tracks; disrupting our current traffic flow for an undefined period of time without defined benefits; solutions that create worse pedestrian and bike conditions than exist today; lack of transparent communication to our residents regarding likelihood of grade separation at all four crossings.

YUDY DENG

I don't think residents should have to sacrifice their homes or quality of life simply because one design is easier. Each rail crossing is different, and we need solutions that reflect the neighborhood around it.

I support continuing the work on Churchill, Meadow, and Charleston, but I want to understand the full cost, funding, traffic, noise, and neighborhood impacts before committing to construction.

The final designs should be safe, attractive, accessible, and maintain neighborhood connections. Eminent domain and displacement should be an absolute last resort. This is a major, long-term investment, and we need to get it right.

HENRY ETZKOWITZ

Did not answer.

GARY GECHLIK

We are talking a 1.4 Billion dollar project for all three, choose one crossing and work with CalTrain already.

RAYMOND LEE GOINS

Did not answer.

BRIAN HAMACHEK

I propose keeping the existing rail crossings.

ED LAUING

This issue has changed radically in the last 10 years due to multiple changes in CalTrain ridership from the pandemic, CalTrain changing their technology, and doubling of construction costs.

On rail committee, which I am on, we have advised council that Churchill should be placed on indefinite HOLD. We are working Charleston and Meadow right now at the 35% engineering phase. We will likely recommend one of those move forward, and not the other, due to total costs and length of construction.

VICKI VEENKER

I appreciate that the question mentions difficult choices and tradeoffs because there are no perfect solutions or easy answers to this question, which is why it has taken years. Balancing community interests is critical on what is one of the largest, if not the largest, infrastructure projects in the city's history, with a pricetag of over a billion dollars even if we don't pursue grade separation at every crossing.

The primary purposes of grade separation are safety and traffic reduction. So we need to keep that in mind as we balance tradeoffs. These considerations have evolved over the years. For example, we have seen the effectiveness of track monitors and improvements in anti-trespass technology like advanced LIDAR and anti-intrusion mats in increasing safety. Population estimates have decreased. Work-from-home has decreased the amount and frequency of commuter traffic. We have also seen an impact on the number of trains running, which did not increase as quickly as expected. So, while I still believe that grade separation is an important solution to both issues, the need has somewhat diminished, allowing us greater flexibility as we choose next steps.

It has been the plan since I have been on council to prioritize the south Palo Alto crossings before Churchill and I support that. The question now is whether we do both at the same time, do the two sequentially, or only separate the grades at the Charleston crossing.

Our options are limited by what we can fund. At present, the federal government is a less reliable source of support as we contemplate funding partners. As a result, it seems unrealistic to move forward with both south Palo Alto crossings simultaneously as that has an estimated price tag of \$1.1billion and a 5-year construction process.

Other options are to sequence Charleston and then Meadow, or to just do Charleston. Given that the price tag for the sequential approach is greater than the simultaneous approach, I support at this time moving forward with Charleston first, learning from it, seeing how our population, commute patterns, and train schedules develop, and then decide if we still have sufficient need and can obtain sufficient funding to also pursue Meadow. Between Measure K and Measure B dollars we are close to being able to fund the council-selected underpass option at Charleston. When considering tradeoffs for this option, the big negative is that several homes need to be acquired; but the positive is that if we have an underpass similar to Oregon, Embarcadero, and University, it will have a significant positive impact on traffic and this is the intersection where traffic is heaviest.

Key for me is that we go ahead and create a bike/pedestrian tunnel both in South Palo Alto and near Churchill while we are finalizing the grade separation plan so that we have a safe crossing site available to students, bike commuters, and others in the near term and before construction commences.