

2026 City Council Candidate Questions

The Future of Retail

The loss of community serving retail is a source of frustration to many residents. What if anything would you do to retain and encourage retail in Palo Alto, particularly in Midtown, the burned-out Philz and Bill's lot, Edgewood Plaza, Charleston Plaza, Town and Country, San Antonio Road, and along El Camino?

BRYNA CHANG

I would:

- **Enforce the Retail Preservation Ordinance**, while selectively relaxing some requirements, as I worked to do on the Planning and Transportation Commission Retail Ad Hoc Committee. The recently adopted updated (in June 2026) retail revitalization ordinance has made a number of changes that should reduce vacancies and increase vibrancy, including:
 - Expanding permitted uses to include other resident-serving businesses — not just traditional retail. A yoga studio or a children's activity center is more beneficial to a neighborhood than a tech office, even if it generates less foot traffic than a coffee shop.
 - Removing increased parking requirements for change of use
 - Allowing bars and business with < 50 outlets on Cal Ave
 - Allowing neighborhood serving offices (e.g., therapists, tax accountants) that still generate foot traffic to use the rear portions of the large retail spaces, so landlords can right-size retail space fronting retail corridors for today's smaller retail footprints.
- **Conduct Outreach** — Have our new economic development city staff member perform outreach to help merchants organize themselves and then hold regular meaningful discussions with the merchants and other business organizations. I would like to establish regular roundtable meetings with the Chamber and local business leaders so that merchants have a genuine platform to raise issues and shape city policy, but this would be most effective if the business organizations have already identified common ground.
- **The Philz/Bill's lot** — push for a community-serving mixed-use solution with ground-floor retail. This site has sat vacant too long, and perhaps some incentives are needed to speed up redevelopment.
- **Midtown, Edgewood, Charleston, and neighborhood centers** — meet regularly with merchants to understand barriers to retail tenancy firsthand, and explore city tools like facade improvement grants or tenant recruitment assistance. I will personally visit local businesses on a regular basis.
- **California Avenue** — the streetscape redesign is long overdue and a source of frustration for merchants and residents alike. We need to implement the Cal Ave plan that has been developed and if elected, I will request regular written staff updates with clear milestone timelines and hold the process accountable to completion.
- **El Camino Real and San Antonio Road** — require ground-floor retail in all new mixed-use development as a condition of approval.
- **Vacancy tax** — I would investigate this carefully before implementing. I want to understand the unintended consequences, ensure permitted uses are appropriate, and consider details like whether pop-up tenancies should reset the clock. The ideal outcome is a retail environment that makes a vacancy tax unnecessary — but if targeted enforcement and incentives are insufficient, I would be open to exploring it.

- **Housing as a retail driver** — increasing the number of nearby residents through thoughtful housing development increases foot traffic and supports local retail.

YUDY DENG

Like I said in my previous answer, too many things in Palo Alto take too long and cost too much. For a small-business owner, those two things are directly connected. Every extra month waiting for a permit or getting conflicting answers from City Hall costs real money.

That's a big reason I developed my Green Light policies. I want to streamline the process, give businesses clearer timelines, and create a more customer-service-focused City Hall. Whether someone is opening a café, childcare center, neighborhood market, or simply improving an existing storefront, we should be helping them get to "yes" faster.

We also have too many important sites sitting vacant for years, from Midtown to the former Philz location. We should be more flexible about pop-ups, food vendors, markets, art, and other temporary uses while permanent plans move forward.

Our local businesses are part of what makes Palo Alto feel like Palo Alto. Saving them time saves them money, and that helps keep our neighborhoods vibrant.

HENRY ETZKOWITZ

Did not answer.

GARY GECHLIK

I am not an expert on retail, but the key is parking. Build free parking, retail will follow. Santa Row is having zero problem with retail.

RAYMOND LEE GOINS

Did not answer.

BRIAN HAMACHEK

I would give each small business opening or expansion one accountable City contact, coordinated permit reviews, a clear checklist, and a way to resolve conflicting instructions. Businesses should understand foreseeable permitting requirements before signing a lease.

For Midtown and the former Philz and Bill's site, I would bring the owner, nearby merchants, and City departments together to identify obstacles and publish next steps and dates. With the owner's agreement and safety approvals, I would explore temporary markets, food vendors, or community uses to bring activity back to the site.

At Edgewood Plaza and Charleston Plaza, I would focus on everyday neighborhood services. At Town and Country, I would support a useful mix of businesses, safe access for students and pedestrians, accessibility for customers with disabilities, and practical deliveries and parking.

Along San Antonio Road and El Camino Real, retail spaces should have visible entrances, flexible floor plans, suitable utilities, and workable loading.

I would simplify outdoor-dining and temporary-use rules while preserving noise, accessibility, and cleanup requirements. Any financial incentives would have a defined public purpose, clear eligibility, a funding cap, and measurable results.

ED LAUING

With the strong assist from the council retail committee, there has been great progress in the retail picture in the last 3 years. Each of the above geographical areas requires a different approach. Execution on Cal Ave improvements has been poor by city staff. Downtown is doing very well. Town and Country is doing extremely well. The future of Phils and Bills is fully in the hands of the land owner.

With new growth, we will encourage developers to meet the retail needs of tenants from coffee shops to hardware stores.

VICKI VEENKER

We should monitor the impact of our new Retail Vitality Ordinance in all areas of the city to see if it is having the desired effect of enhancing retail districts in all of these areas. We have broadened allowable businesses to combat vacancies. We should then adapt and update it to enhance what is working.

We should also consider supporting community events in these different areas, entertainment, and public art activations, along with attractive public spaces where people will want to gather.