

Questionnaire for City Council Candidates 2009

Palo Alto Neighborhoods (PAN)

To the readers: The intended audience for this questionnaire is normal residents who are interested in the issues (versus activists who are deeply enmeshed) and the candidates were instructed to respond appropriately (detail and length). The candidates have diverse backgrounds and the questions are intended to be open enough to allow them to demonstrate their knowledge, experience, priorities and perspectives while being constrained enough to allow you to make comparisons between the candidates. The questions are not intended to allow safe, generic responses that reveal little. The candidates' responses will stay in the same order relative to each other, but we rotated whose response is first. Candidates have the option of including clickable links (hyperlinks) in their responses and of making the name at the beginning of each response clickable.

For more information on the candidates and their positions, you are encouraged to visit their individual websites, which can be found at:

[M] Brian Steen : <http://briansteen.org/>

Terminology: "the City" refers to the government of the City of Palo Alto.

1. Reason for running: What are your primary reasons for running for City Council?

[M] Brian Steen

I bring a 30 year career of public service experience to the Palo Alto Council. It's a positive and inspiring challenge to utilize my skills to improve Palo Alto.

I'm a former board member of the Pacific Grove United School District and served during a time of budget deficits that were eliminated during my term.

During the past year, I've worked hard with community leaders to bring this 21st century transportation improvement to the Peninsula in a manner that will provide the highest transportation value to residents and visitors with a positive impact to our communities, and on a financially feasible basis. Of all your choices for Palo Alto City Council, I have the greatest experience and knowledge to represent Palo Alto in the HSR process.

For nearly a decade, I was the Executive Director of the Sempervirens Fund, the oldest land trust in California, based here on the Peninsula. I directed land acquisition and implemented fundraising campaigns securing \$26.5 million for the protection of redwood forests in the Santa Cruz Mountains. During that time, I negotiated, funded and purchased over 3,100 acres of forest watershed lands in 20 transactions for resource protection. Before that, I led the Big Sur Land Trust in preserving 15,000 acres as open space along the scenic Big Sur Coast. There can be no question that I will protect the natural environment of Palo Alto with the utmost integrity.

2. Experience:

Non-incumbents: Describe your personal experience with Palo Alto City government and recent issues that have come before the Council (Public Hearings). 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?

Incumbent (Klein): What have been your major initiatives on the Council? Describe your role and the results.

[M] Brian Steen

I am a current board member of Palo Alto Rotary and initiated its joint project with the City of Palo Alto Community Services Department to create attractive “gateways” to the City at the intersections of Middlefield Road and Palo Alto Avenue, and at El Camino Real and Palo Alto Avenue.

3. Potential conflicts of interest: The City Council can be hampered in its deliberations when members have to recuse themselves because of conflicts of interest. Please identify potential conflicts that you may have (excluding your personal residence) in ongoing or forthcoming issues.

[M] Brian Steen

My wife and I own one rental house in Palo Alto in addition to our residence. My wife is a Research Psychologist employed by the Palo Alto Medical Foundation Research Institute.

4. Deficit: The City has a large structural deficit. A large part of its costs are for employees, both current and retired. How do you propose to contain those costs? If you advocate reductions in the workforce, which services would be affected? Do you advocate an alternative way(s) to contain costs?

[M] Brian Steen

Restructure budget to reflect retirements and vacancies
Implement hiring freeze excluding public safety and special positions
Expense reductions and one-time cost savings
Examine all General Fund services for potential reductions

5. Business license tax: What is your position on a business license tax, such as the one on the November ballot?

[M] Brian Steen

I favor Proposition A as a reasonable cost of doing business in Palo Alto.

6. Utilities Funds: Currently a portion of the City's Utility Fund is paid into the General Fund. What do you think are appropriate levels for such payments?

[M] Brian Steen

The current transfer from PA utilities to the General Fund is 25%. I support continuing transfers until a different and stable revenue source can be identified.

7. High Speed Rail (HSR): What is your position on HSR, including undergrounding? If HSR is built, should the City request a station? What should be the City's role?

[M] Brian Steen

Over the past year, I've worked daily with community leaders, agencies and elected representatives to assess High Speed Rail (HSR) feasibility. I believe that HSR, if done

correctly, has the potential to create new transportation and housing connectivity.

Palo Alto can lead the way in exploring creative urban design and sustainable transportation solutions that support community and regional values.

8. Retail: Palo Alto has multiple business districts and neighborhood centers. The health of a retail area is dependent on far more than just individual stores. Although cities cannot provide the level of management found in malls, other cities do more than Palo Alto. What should the City do to support the retail sector?

[M] Brian Steen

Continue to provide high level of City services, particularly Public Works maintenance and improvement projects, i.e, Keep sidewalks and streets safe and repaired.

9. High-density housing: What is your perspective on the major forces pushing for high-density housing?

[M] Brian Steen

I'm opposed to ABAG's requirement for up to 3,000 new housing units. As a strong regional employment center, Palo Alto should get proper credit for job creation with a renegotiated ABAG housing requirement.

10. Development impacts: The City has been criticized for allowing developers to understate the impacts of their projects, and thus avoid paying for measures to reduce the problems created. How much of a problem is this? What changes are needed?

[M] Brian Steen

I believe PA Planning staff and the Planning and the Transportation Commission does excellent work to identify impacts and to specify appropriate mitigations. However, I'm critical of late hour "microphone negotiations" with Council members that amends staff and PTC recommendations.

11. Affordable Housing: The City's current approach to providing affordable housing relies heavily on requiring new housing developments to include affordable units. What is your assessment of this approach? What changes would you make?

[M] Brian Steen

I'm supportive of affordable housing along transportation corridors. Percentage of new affordable housing should be similar or less than those in neighboring communities as a credit for Palo Alto's status as a regional employer.

12. Planned Community (PC) Zoning: Planned Community zoning is controversial because it is perceived as being routinely abused. What is your perspective on the use of this zoning? Use specific examples to illustrate your points.

[M] Brian Steen

PC zoning is abused only if the City allows such abuse. I'm in favor of using PC zoning in special circumstances to achieve significant public benefit.

13. Stanford Hospital Project: The expansion of the Stanford Hospital will have substantial impacts on Palo Alto, most significantly increased traffic and requirements for additional housing. What do you think is appropriate for the City to require of Stanford as part of this project?

[M] Brian Steen

I'm in favor of this regional hospital but only if related impacts such as traffic and housing can be mitigated.

14. Civic Engagement: What is your interpretation of the term "civic engagement"? What are your priorities for improvements in this area?

[M] Brian Steen

Civic engagement means encouraging open public participation on public issues. Palo Alto does a good job of this. I don't favor special interest closed door meetings or exparte communications with council members.

15. Neighborhood Associations: In what ways have neighborhood associations been beneficial to the City? What, if anything, would you change about that relationship?

[M] Brian Steen

Most recently the work of the Charleston Neighborhood Assoc. was beneficial in identifying traffic problems and solutions along Charleston. Their involvement resulted in a good project that has increased safety without significant restriction of traffic flow. And it was accomplished in over a reasonable time period. A good example of neighborhood and City partnership.

16. Meeting Effectiveness: Council meetings often run to well after midnight, and decisions are deferred (continued) or referred (sent back for further consideration). What would you do to improve the effectiveness of Council meetings?

[M] Brian Steen

Rely more on staff and commission recommendations and minimize council member amendments, particularly late night "microphone negotiations"

17. Balancing Issues: A major focus of the current Council has been environmental issues, especially those related to Global Warming. Using this as a specific example, explain how you think Council and staff should allocate time and effort to the many issues that come before them.

[M] Brian Steen

Rely on and implement the City's existing climate Protection Plan and updates.

18. (Optional) Unasked Question: If there is a question you think we should have asked, ask and answer it.

Option not exercised.