

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:

[F] [Karen Holman](http://karenholman.org) : karenholman.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?

[F] [Karen Holman](http://karenholman.org) : karenholman.org

When I moved to Palo Alto in 1975, I felt like I had found a new home. It mattered to me that Palo Alto had beautiful neighborhoods, spectacular parks such as the Baylands and Foothills, numerous bookstores and movie theatres, a diverse population, a major university, and a populace that held the environment in high regard.

Some things have changed, but I still can't imagine living anywhere else.

After several years of community involvement including eight years serving on the Planning & Transportation Commission, I still believe that this is a wonderful town but that we need to

- Zone for what we want and follow the General Plan and code, the publicly adopted vision for the city that provides a reasonable right of expectation on the part of the residents, businesses, and applicants.
- Be proactive rather than reactive in attracting new and retaining existing businesses.
- Assure that our short-term goals match with long-term financial viability.
- Honor the public trust, meaning act in the public's best interests and require transparency in our government processes. This underlies all else because if we do not have trust in our processes, if the public is not heard, we will not be able to build community and move forward to outcomes that do serve the public.

I hope to bring my experience to Council to forward these goals, raise the level of pride in our community, and make Palo Alto once again a most desired place to live and do business.

For more information, please visit my website at karenholman.org

as well as my responses to the other questions published by PAN.

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.

[F] [Karen Holman](mailto:karenholman.org) : karenholman.org

I have served on the Planning & Transportation Commission for the past 8 years, two of those as Chair. Previous involvement included the South of Forest Avenue I (SOFA) working group, serving as co-chair on SOFA II, and numerous community organizations.

Among other things as a member of the Commission:

- I emphasized the need and changed the focus to waste reduction rather than only on recycling when the Environment Services Center was being proposed. This led ultimately to a Zero Waste Plan being adopted by the City. Initiated by Acterra's formation of the Zero Waste Task Force of San Mateo, Santa Clara, and San Benito Counties and then the City's Zero Waste Task Force, I was a member of both groups.
- A proposal I developed to allow the subdivision of lots with at least one existing historic home accompanied by a preservation covenant was adopted unanimously by the City's Historic Resources Board, Planning Commission and City Council. This allows the conservation of the smaller, more affordable homes. Development pressures have proven that market forces would result in demolition of these smaller, more affordable units to be replaced by one larger, more expensive home.
- I am about to recommend the adoption of a new practice that would require mitigations and conditions of approval to be in place prior to certificates of occupancy being issued whenever and wherever feasible. This should help eliminate or minimize the environmental impacts resulting from delayed or neglected requirement fulfillment.
- Palo Alto needs more grocery stores, especially neighborhood serving. I initiated the discussion of a Grocery Store combining district that should be coming back to the Commission for discussion. The purpose is to identify locations we need and want to encourage or require grocery stores, including in Neighborhood Centers.
- I initiated consideration to revise the Planned Community zone process to eliminate the abuses too often experienced as part of these projects, and am one of three Commissioners who is working on revisions.
- Recommended that staff maintain a standard conditions of approval checklist for foothills (OS) projects. The list has been established and expanded to include conditions which address, for example, staging of construction in sensitive areas, transport of oak tree debris, and leach field construction which minimizes root disturbance. This is a result of my initiation.
- I first raised the issue of concrete as a major construction product pollutant and its impacts on our CO2 emissions.

• I was a constant advocate for the completion the recent Bay Lands Master Plan.
Worth noting: The Planning & Transportation Commission (PTC) does not review commercial or multi-family residential projects unless they are specific and large sites or PC zoned projects. For instance, the PTC did not review the Arbor Real project that replaced the Hyatt Hotel. Nor does the PTC review single family homes except those in the Foothills.

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.

[F] [Karen Holman](mailto:karenholman.org) : karenholman.org

The only conflicts I might have are with the Ming's project should it come to the Council and Palo Alto History Museum agreements with the City.

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?

[F] [Karen Holman](mailto:karenholman.org) : karenholman.org

There are union negotiations going on currently that will likely result in some relief in ongoing City employee obligations. Painful as this is for employees, the employees and the City will both benefit from a balanced budget.

I do not advocate at this time for either staff cuts or reduced services but rather for internal audits to identify and rectify duplicated efforts, waste, and inefficiencies. I believe significant savings can be identified through this process as well as through improved management practices that focus on responsible expenditures of public funds.

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

[F] [Karen Holman](mailto:karenholman.org) : karenholman.org

I am opposed to the business license tax for a few reasons, and will mention some here:

• While I understand that a ballot measure that earmarks funds would require a two-thirds majority to pass the tax, the lack of any commitment on the part of the City to improving business conditions loses my support. There have been assurances made in the past to improve the permitting process, to improve the alleys, and add directional signage for businesses on cross streets that have not materialized.

One example of needed improvement: there is no coordinated process to get approvals for holding events that promoting business or to get occupancy permits for tenant improvements even in existing buildings. The current system requires different, uncoordinated approvals from the numerous departments each of which has a different set of criteria to check. As a result new issues can be discovered late in the process, causing delays, costing tenants money in delayed opening dates or, worse yet, causing them to give up and go to another community. I hear these stories from frustrated business owners regularly.

Improvements made to business conditions will help the businesses thrive which in turn helps Palo Alto's revenue stream.

- A time of recession is not a time to raise taxes on the businesses that are struggling to make it and that contribute to our bottom line. While the tax does not kick in until 2011, many economists predict the downturn to last as much as 5 years.
- Palo Alto needs to commit to and conduct specific, targeted internal audits to look for waste, duplicated efforts, and efficiencies before looking to raise taxes or cut services. The recent phone audit identifying \$235,000 due to lack of oversight is an example. Because Palo Alto does not use zero based budgeting but rather adds on to existing department budgets, there is good likelihood of budgetary improvements.

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?

[F] [Karen Holman](http://karenholman.org) : karenholman.org

General Fund owns the Utility infrastructure and is entitled to a reasonable rate of return on the investment. But this rate of return should be based on the level of investment and not on the General Fund needs for funds. Electric rates were significantly lower than surrounding cities until the City of Palo Alto's long term electric supply contract ended in 2004. Now electric rates have soared, making us much more aware of the impacts on rates of the transfers to the General Fund. Palo Alto should benchmark other municipal utilities for their practices. Silicon Valley Power, the municipal utility in the City of Santa Clara, offers lower electric rates than Palo Alto, for example.

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?

[F] [Karen Holman](http://karenholman.org) : karenholman.org

The project proposal by the High Speed Rail Authority (HSRA) to have the train elevated on a wall that would divide Palo Alto, require eminent domain, and create a number of environmental impacts is not tenable.

The concept of high speed rail is appealing and may come to pass in some fashion. But at this time, there are significant issues that have not been resolved. Some questions have not even been addressed. Among these issues are funding (only \$10billion was authorized by the voters toward a minimum \$40billion project), compatibility of passenger cars with freight, best design (cut and cover, trench, etc), best route, a real business plan, environmental analysis that includes impacts vs benefits , on and on.

I do not support a station in Palo Alto because of the scale of development that would have to be created to support the function.

The City's role should continue to be participation in the dialog with the Authority and other communities ensuring that proper analysis is done, and that the process is open and transparent. The City should continue to hold public meetings to keep the community informed and to get public feedback.

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?

[F] [Karen Holman](http://karenholman.org) : karenholman.org

Retail businesses bring much needed sales tax dollars to the City, provide goods and services to the residences and business sector, and contribute a great deal to the community character. A healthy retail sector is essential to a vibrant community such as Palo Alto.

There are several steps that Palo Alto could take to better support the retail sector. Among those are:

- Coordinate the permitting process. There is no coordinated process to get approvals for tenant improvements even in existing buildings. The current system requires different, uncoordinated approvals from the numerous departments each of which has a different set of criteria to check. As a result new issues can be discovered late in the process, causing delays, costing tenants money in delayed opening dates or, worse yet, causing them to give up and go to another community. I hear these stories from frustrated business owners regularly.
- Implement a similar process for event permits. The series of uncoordinated permits an owner has to apply for is detrimental to holding events that promote business and often benefit the public.
- Institute a business registry regardless of the outcome of the Business License Tax ballot measure. A list of businesses is needed to know what kind of businesses we have; what businesses we should be working to attract in order to create good retail synergies; when businesses leave to learn from why they leave; better inform businesses and public what businesses exist that may be customers or suppliers of good or services.
- Promote local independent businesses as a larger mix of the retail sector. The community and municipal benefits of local independent businesses are well documented including that they put more money back into local economies than do chain stores.
- The City could and should better recognize and promote its long-term retail businesses.
- Destination Palo Alto could better promote the businesses (as well as the amenities) that are here on an ongoing basis rather than focus primarily on special events.

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

[F] [Karen Holman](http://karenholman.org) : karenholman.org

Palo Alto has a high jobs to housing imbalance. Some approaches to correcting the imbalance (one determinant is ABAG) are to mandate Palo Alto to zone for housing to address this imbalance (which can translate to building the housing given the right market conditions). Requiring housing city by city is supposed to reduce car trips and vehicle mileage thus improving environmental conditions.

There are some faulty aspects to this approach. A regional approach would better address the fact that some communities, such as Palo Alto, provide the jobs for other surrounding towns. A singular focus on housing does not consider impacts on schools, parks or ability to provide community services. ABAG does not recognize rezoning that would retain existing housing units

such as the fact that a single house is now allowed to replace a cottage cluster of small homes. Palo Alto workers are not necessarily going to buy a smaller home in Palo Alto for more money and less or no yard when they can get more home and more land in more distant locations.

Palo Alto can absorb some housing but our more pressing need that has minimal impacts is housing of maximum unit size, thus creating minimal impacts on the schools, increasing work force housing, and adding to Palo Alto's diversity.

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?

[F] [Karen Holman](http://karenholman.org) : karenholman.org

Impacts from development are sometimes not well mitigated. Some basic things that can be implemented to address the issue are:

- Require that conditions of approval and mitigation measures are in place prior to occupancy. Buildings can now typically be occupied without mitigation measures being implemented for long periods of time, thus negatively impacting the quality of life of residences and businesses.
- Require penalties for non-conformance to conditions of approval and mitigation measures. There are currently no penalties for not providing them or not continuing them other than correction of the condition which is sometimes hard to enforce and does not act as a deterrent to reoccurrence.
- Require annual or semi-annual reporting and/or inspection to insure the continuation of conditions of approval and mitigation measures.
- Better recognize that development impacts do not stop at the property line, meaning that existing conditions in the area should not be ignored when considering allowances for parking requirements, for instance. Example: Alma Plaza project was granted a reduced parking requirement even though the apartments next door are underparked and already create spillover parking.

One way traffic impacts are not well determined is that Palo Alto does not use existing conditions to determine intersection performance, but rather assumes full occupancy for even unoccupied buildings. Other communities use existing conditions which is by many accounts more in accord with the California Environmental Quality Act requirements for determining impacts. Palo Alto should update its methods.

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?

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The City's policy of including affordable (BMR) units in development was a progressive policy when it was adopted, and I support it. We do not, however, make a dent in the community need through this method.

Other means of getting BMR units are less well implemented in Palo Alto. Rather than rely on new development to build new these units or buying land to build new BMR units, Palo Alto

could better make use of available funds by buying pre-existing housing developments and convert them to BMR. At a calculation of \$500,000 a unit for new construction, this could be, and has been done, at considerably less expense.

Consider that a 6-unit apartment development can be demolished and replaced with 3 for sale condominiums. Purchase and restoration of such projects is an example not only of how Palo Alto could make use of its resources in getting more BMR units but also prevent the loss of Palo Alto's unit count.

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.

[F] [Karen Holman](http://karenholman.org) : karenholman.org

Planned Community (PC) zoning can be a tool to achieve positive outcomes not achievable through any other means. It is unfortunate that abuses and failed agreements have led to mistrust of the possibilities. But it is hard to argue that 800 High's public plazas materialized, that providing a water fountain merits zoning exceptions, that disappeared open space is not a violation of the public's expectation in return for larger development.

Some of the problems in PC zoning as Palo Alto utilizes it are

- public benefits are not defined
- public benefits are not considered relative to amount of exceptions requested
- there is no real penalty for violating the provision of the public benefit
- developments are not driven by the benefit but rather too often appear to be afterthoughts to justify development exceptions
- they are applicant driven rather than City directed
- required inspections are not conducted to assure the existence of public benefits or other consistency with the ordinance
- required findings are too often justifications rather than findings
- application of PC zoning at various times is applied too liberally
(consider the proliferation of PC zones, especially in the downtown)

As one of three Planning & Transportation commissioners working to revise the PC ordinance, I hope to have recommended improvements presented in the near future that address many of these issues.

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?

[F] [Karen Holman](http://karenholman.org) : karenholman.org

As the Stanford Medical Center project will be coming to the Council, it is recommended by the City Attorney's office that candidates not respond with opinions about the project outcome in the interest of good public process. The impacts such as traffic and housing will be assessed in the environmental impact report, and California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) requires that impacts be mitigated and that alternatives be considered that would eliminate impacts. It is also possible that a statement of overriding considerations can be made by the Council if there are compelling public benefits, but only after all reasonable and feasible alternatives are considered.

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

[F] [Karen Holman](http://karenholman.org) : karenholman.org

Civic engagement to me is far more than having dialog. It is having opportunity for varied opinions to be heard and considered. It is providing a level playing field so all constituents have equal opportunity to participate. It is about transparency so everyone has the same information on which to base their expectations and participation. It is about respect for diverse opinion. About utilization of Palo Alto’s intellectual capital.

It is about Honoring the Public Trust. It is an understanding that government works for the public and in its best interests, those of its residents and businesses. And that those who work in the public’s interests also deserve respect. It is about volunteerism and being a good neighbor. This is civic engagement I would like to see us achieve.

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

[F] [Karen Holman](http://karenholman.org) : karenholman.org

Neighborhood Association activism provides numerous benefits to the City including program implementation, leadership, and community education. PANDA programs, emergency preparedness, green program education, and National Night Out activities are a few examples where Associations help foster and forward community agendas. Associations also can provide critical information to the public and the City regarding projects and policy considerations as no one knows the community better than those who live in it.

Some cities provide a level of financial support to neighborhood associations to help them be better organized, better distribute information to their neighborhoods and present to Council and the public. Palo Alto should consider the model provided by other communities such as San Jose and evaluate. There is a lot to be learned and gained from the volunteer efforts of Palo Alto’s highly informed, active, and educated community.

An improved City website can be a better vehicle for providing information about and links to neighborhood associations such as contact information, history, and updates.

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?

[F] [Karen Holman](http://karenholman.org) : karenholman.org

Meetings can be made more efficient and effective by better managing agendas. Having several major items on the same agenda, especially when the agenda also contains a number of special recognitions is a sure recipe for late meetings. It would be more effective to meet on more Mondays than to have such packed agendas. Packed agendas also means that the public has to stay until the wee hours to be heard. Another possibility is to start earlier, say 6pm, for the special recognitions.

Improving assurances that advisory Board and Commission meetings are effective is another way to make items go more quickly at Council. This accelerates efficiency because fewer aspects of items would need to be discovered and explored at the Council level, but rather Council would be freed up to consider the policies, public comment, and staff and Commission recommendations. One specific example is to eliminate late submissions that have not been

vettted by staff, commission, and public so they are discussed at the Council level. Not only is this bad practice as there is no transparency, but it also leads to meeting inefficiency.

Yet another improvement would be to provide packets at least a week ahead of Council meetings. This is done for Commission meetings, and surely could be accomplished for Council, as well. This gives all interested parties better opportunity to formulate their questions, get answers, and better consider the information in packets so Council meetings are less investigative and more deliberative sessions.

And, of course, high quality staff reports that reveal and consider the critical information relevant to the consideration leads to more informed discussion, fewer questions, and quicker decisions.

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.

[F] [Karen Holman](http://karenholman.org) : karenholman.org

If the question is intended to ascertain how projects and goals are often interconnected and cannot be viewed in isolation of each other, then it should be considered that environmental goals also effect or impact development, transportation, City budget, and staff work load, to name a few. Larger policy decisions need to be considered or made before initiating specific discussions that do not consider or that are inconsistent with existing policies.

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

[F] Option not exercised.