

Question 16

Questionnaire for City Council Candidates 2009

Palo Alto Neighborhoods (PAN)

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

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"

[N] Mark Weiss: No response from candidate to this question.

[A] Dan Dykwel : <http://www.dandykwel.com>

Ah, this is a good one! One approach may be to limit the speaking time of the council members, as we do with the public. It's not always necessary to hear the same reasoning from 7 or 8 council members. Also, the Council needs to focus on policy and avoid the trap of micro-managing. We have a city manager and staff to do the work.

[B] Victor Frost: No response from candidate.

[C] Chris Gaither

Yes, Palo Alto is infamous on the Peninsula for its long city council meetings. In fact my friends in San Francisco are aware of Palo Alto's time intensive council meetings. We are fortunate in Palo Alto to have both citizens and city employees who are actively engaged in city issues and matters; and both sides feel the freedom and responsibility to express and support their perspectives during council meetings.

I see the challenge as five-fold. First of all, the council considers too many agenda items in one session. The council meets on the first three non holiday Mondays throughout the month. The plan should be to have the agenda for each meeting to first focus on crises/critical issues and those that need immediate attention and a decision that night. The next priority on the agenda should be all those where public comment and review are expected, and needed to make the best informed decision for the entire city, but a decision that night is not mandatory or feasible. One can use the example of how federal and state courts/judges make their decisions in cases. Some decisions take time, and need to include various factors. A decision cannot always be made at that particular point in time. Certain items on the agenda should fall in the category of hearing opinions and fact finding only for that session with the final decision being announced and made at the following council meeting with no further discussion or fact finding acceptable. If too many of these fact finding and opinion hearing items are scheduled for one night when first planning the agenda, then shorten the list to no more than 3 such items for that night as part of the final agenda. There is always next week as these are not the crises issues. Thirdly, if there are resident or employee proclamations and recognitions for that night, do those first when the meeting is called to order or after the minute approvals so that those individuals can be awarded early and leave the meeting if they desire. Fourthly, residents should be encouraged to speak only about that night's agenda and scheduled items to curtail this portion of council

meetings. If a resident has a non-agenda, and non-emergency item to express, they should be encouraged to express their comments by either emailing or phoning a city council person to establish personal communication. If this is deemed an item that should be brought to the entire council's or public's attention for discussion that issue can be placed on the agenda in the proper order at a future meeting. Lastly, if there are items on the agenda where a council person or persons have to excuse themselves due to that issue being a conflict of interest, those items should be last in the appropriate section of the agenda so that the council person can be active in that council session for as long as possible, thereby reducing disruption, and ensuring a full active council for most of the meeting.

A final thought is that the council could designate one meeting of the month where crises/critical issues (needing answer that night), and the rest of the meeting is allocated to hearing resident concerns on any issues. This special monthly meeting would be announced and advertised in advance each month so that residents are aware that the primary focus of that meeting is to hear residents concerns.

[D] Tim Gray : www.vote4Gray.com/

Set the priorities and stick with the priorities. No more community theatre. I will work on many committees and be prepared to be decisive an the Council Meetings. I have heard that not every Council Member shares the workload of these meetings, and may explain why more deliberation goes on in the Council Chambers.

[E] John Hackmann

Council meetings should start somewhat earlier and then go to no later than a fixed ending time, with automatic continuance to the next day if all business is not completed. It is not fair to shut out so many seniors who may go to bed early, and residents who need to go to work the next day, from public participation. Council members could comment more succinctly. Council size could be reduced, if the voters choose to, from 9 to 7 as many have suggested.

Definitely, meetings need to end earlier. In September I was at a City Council meeting and stayed until the decision on the issue was made at about 1:00 am. This was on a proposal on which I spoke to possibly consider more books at the Downtown Library, originally slated to have no increase in collection space in a \$4,000,000 remodel. (Later amended for some expansion.) The closed session then ended about 2:00 am.

Another City Council meeting in August ran near midnight at which I spoke opposing the "gross receipts tax" formulation for the Measure A to be placed on the ballot. Near midnight, with twenty-three people in the room, I noticed that I appeared to be the only non-city employee or non Council member present when the meeting finally ended. To have only one or two members of the public present at the end of a meeting is not acceptable for the city of Palo Alto with such a high level of civic engagement.

[F] Karen Holman : 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 vetted 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.

[G] Larry Klein www.ReelectLarryKlein.com

Actually I think Council meetings are generally effective (particularly when I'm the Mayor !). Democracy is messy. Palo Alto is an engaged community and we have many voices contending to be heard on a wide variety of issues. Sometimes, a referral back to staff or a commission might indicate a Council unwilling to make a tough decision (bad); other times it might indicate a wise recognition that more information and thought is needed (good) My watchword as Mayor in 2008 was " taking care of business". that meant moving things along and reaching resolution, even on tough issues. It didn't mean concluding business by 9p.m.

[H] Leon Leong : www.leonleong.com

Many issues are complex and the public needs to be heard on the issues, and a robust discussion are needed on decisions that may have long lasting implications.

The agenda should be arrange so that public input can heard at reasonable hours. On more complex issues, the members of public who choose to do so, should be allowed to "collect their minutes" together, and a pro/con/rebuttal type of arguments be heard.

[I] Corey Levens : www.electcoreylevens.com

When City Council meetings run into the early morning hours, the Council must recognize that open government and transparency in the Council's operations suffer, and that effective government also suffers. There are several possibilities to improving the effectiveness and efficiency of Council meetings.

As a corporate attorney, I have attended hundreds of meetings of Boards of Directors as an advisor. As a member of the Board of Directors of my neighborhood association and of the Stanford Campus Recreation Association (SCRA), and of other such bodies, I have attended many such meetings as a director. I have found that the most important element in running an efficient board meeting is preparation and pre-meeting discussion concerning the items on the agenda. To the extent time is spent in any meeting on discussion or debate between council members which could have taken place before the meeting, all members of the public are inconvenienced and the Council's effectiveness is diminished. This is different from public statements and opinions which council members may have on an issue and which are very appropriately made at a Council meeting.

I have also attended Council meetings, however, where the public was given the opportunity to speak and speaker after speaker rose to make the same point over and over again. While no one seeks to deny or limit the public's right to be heard, there surely are mechanisms that can be used or devised to let the public know that their voice has been heard without listening to essentially the same speech ad infinitum.

[J] Gail Price

Conducting council meeting business after 11:00pm is not in the best interest of the community members, staff, and the community. I would like to see the following: 1. Limit the number of items for each agenda for each meeting 2. Establish a practice formally or informally that each council member limits the number and duration of their comments (encourage a practice of only speaking if a new point or significant modification of a point needs to be made). 3. Consider time limits for council members (allowing each one an extended period once per evening). 4. Conduct City business with a premise of trust and not distrust regarding staff presentations and recommendations and 5. Promote and praise behaviors that focus on brief, relevant, insightful comments designed to promote thoughtful results. I do not believe that interminable discussions lead to better outcomes.

[K] [Greg Scharff](http://ElectGregScharff.com) : ElectGregScharff.com

A nine member Council makes it very hard to be efficient. As a Council member I personally will strive to be well prepared on the issues, and be succinct and to the point.

[L] Nancy Shepherd: www.electNancyShepherd.com

Palo Alto is a community that likes to make decisions carefully. As a former leader in the school community and as a graduate of Leadership Mid Peninsula I have been trained in meeting management. I have presided over a 70 member board, managed overflow community meetings and trained other nonprofit leaders. Meeting management works best with a clear agenda, a time frame for each item and efforts from all members to keep comments crisp and efficient. I am known for doing my homework ahead of time and getting answers to questions prior to discussion. This should help to improve Council meetings.
