

Question 8

Questionnaire for City Council Candidates 2009

Palo Alto Neighborhoods (PAN)

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

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?

[E] John Hackmann

Listening to businesses, and responding reasonably, is the best approach. Neighborhood retail has very site-specific issues, which need to be addressed individually and with clear written notice to and input from the neighbors. Two examples of such site specific local neighborhood center issues are the loss of walkable retail along El Camino adjacent to the Barron Park neighborhood and preservation of neighbor friendly single story retail at the Edgewood Shopping Center.

[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 goods 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.

[G] Larry Klein www.ReelectLarryKlein.com

I'm not sure that it's correct to say that other cities do more than Palo Alto. Some, indeed most, of our retail areas are doing as well as their peers in other communities in this economic downturn, Town and Country with a 98% occupancy rate is doing better; Downtown is doing worse. I think the Council should examine the causes of the sharp downturn on University before we undertake any significant expenditure of funds. A revitalized and better focused Chamber of Commerce would be helpful in this regard.

[H] Leon Leong : www.leonleong.com

Support for the retail sector should touch on the following areas:

- Comprehensive Plan, which will balance the needs between retail, residential & community facilities: many years ago, Palo Alto had neighborhood serving shopping areas, over the years, two of the shopping areas have decayed and no longer have any retail operations. the council should have as one of it's priority to address this through zoning.
- The city should ensure that any permitting reviews for renovations be handled in a timely fashion
- The city should pass zoning and other ordinances to help attract & support the retail establishments.
- The city should continue to devote resources to making the retail areas clean, safe, and an inviting areas to shop.

[I] Corey Levens : www.electcoreylevens.com

From 1993-1998, I owned and operated a small, retail franchise children's store, "Once Upon A Child," in Mountain View. I later opened a second store in San Jose. The retail sector is, in my opinion and from my experience, the most difficult business there is. I eventually sold my stores and returned to the much "saner" hours of practicing law in a large law firm. I have unlimited respect for the grit and determination of the owners of the many retail businesses in Palo Alto. My response to this question is, therefore, based on my personal experiences in owning a small business in the retail sector.

As a store owner, I did not expect the city to manage the mall my store was located in, or to provide subsidies, or to determine what type of store would locate near me. What I did expect was that the city would efficiently and professionally provide basic services, such as police and fire protection, that the trash would be collected regularly, and, most of all, that the city would not make doing business more difficult than it inherently is. I also found that my best days were when there were city celebrations, art fairs, and other similar functions going on.

To support the retail sector, therefore, the City must provide the services we all expect of the City and do so efficiently and effectively. The City should encourage and, when appropriate, promote community events. Such events serve to improve the quality of life in Palo Alto and make life in here more exciting and interesting. But most of all, the City must not make it more difficult and expensive to do business in Palo Alto than it already is. We cannot afford to drive these businesses away to other cities. Palo Alto has already lost too many businesses. We must reverse this tide.

[J] Gail Price

Supporting and enhancing retail opportunities within Palo Alto is very important. Diversifying retail builds a strong base capable of withstanding economic cycles. It should include a range of types and sizes of retail services in many settings, including along major arterials, neighborhood retail centers, adjacent to transit center and activity centers, and in mixed-use projects that include housing opportunities. I do not favor big box retail but would like to see a creative plan, incorporating Fry's, into a mixed use or related project to combine both Fry's positive economic impact (i.e. sales tax) and housing, demonstrating smart growth principles, near a transit center. I think the city should actively consider appropriate hotel development to provide needed services and to generate transit occupancy tax revenue.

To have a strong and adaptable business environment, I would promote a broader examination of successful business retention and marketing approaches done by other communities of comparable size and circumstances. An excellent example of successful and thriving neighborhood retail services has been demonstrated in the City of Berkeley. Its diversity and strong retail activity has helped it retain one the strongest sales tax base in the Bay Area during the recession. I am concerned that we have vacant and underutilized retail and office properties in our community and two of our four neighborhood commercial centers are in disarray. To ensure better understanding and collaboration between the City and the Chamber of Commerce, it would be appropriate to ascertain if the standing committees and initiatives are really addressing the core issues.

The vision and activities of the Palo Alto Chamber of Commerce directly complement the content and policies of the Business and Economics chapter of the Comprehensive Plan. One of my concerns is that this chapter has 33 policies and an implementation plan of 18 items. While I recognize it covers a period of several years, I think additional prioritization would be helpful to achieve the outcomes desired. Are we focusing on the most critical areas? Are we being efficient with the resources and staff that we have to complete this important work?

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

Palo Alto needs to foster a culture at City Hall that supports local business and promotes vibrant and thriving commercial areas. It should be an easy and pleasant experience to shop and do business in downtown Palo Alto. Businesses should feel that they are a welcome partner in our community and that they are receiving the support necessary to make our commercial areas fun and inviting places to spend time. We need to retain our existing businesses and bring new business to Palo Alto in order to increase our sales tax revenue and create a vibrant and healthy community that provides the services we all want. We need to encourage high sales tax generating business to locate in Palo Alto and create a business and service oriented environment in order to promote our commercial areas. As a small business owner in Palo Alto, I understand the needs of business and as a 20 year resident of Palo Alto; I understand the need to be able to fund the services we all desire.

[L] Nancy Shepherd: www.electNancyShepherd.com

The revitalization of Town & Country Village from a tired old shopping center to a vibrant busy retail center without the public drama of a developer asking for exceptions to the comprehensive plan demonstrates that city involvement can be minimal and developers can bring inspiration to tired community centers. We need to amplify these successes so that our other stalled or idle business centers like Edgewood Plaza, Alma Plaza and University Avenue can become revitalized also.

I would like to see the Chamber of Commerce develop an effective business focus on how to bring back vibrant shopping centers and business districts. The City's Economic development office needs to be strengthened so that it can work closely with Chamber, local businesses and large corporations.

There is also an opportunity to re-energize our commercial districts with green technology businesses. Having Tesla move its corporate headquarters to the research park is a great incentive to reach out and attract other green business and Palo Alto shouldn't miss this opportunity. This can create that network of innovation around new technology while generating a buzz for green development.

[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.

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

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

Directly and indirectly, business accounts for roughly one-third of our annual revenue. In addition to revenue generation, it allows us and visitors to Palo Alto able to buy what we need and want. Merchants add vitality to commercial streets, and business people contribute significantly to civic priorities as well. It is in our long-term interest to promote the health of Palo Alto businesses. We can do that by creating policies to attract and retain the rich mix of retail that will generate the tax revenues and enable maintenance of high quality city services.

We really need to develop a business support strategy. We can no longer afford to leave this important segment of our community to the vagaries of institutional inertia. We might create an ombudsman (reassigned from existing staff), who can help new businesses navigate the complexities of obtaining permits, or get back to the basics of keeping our retail areas clean and our parking garages clean and safe. Signage and alleyways that serve as corridors between shops could be enhanced. Getting to a comprehensive assessment of our strategic options will require collaborations among the Council, staff, business community, and citizens. Each is a partner and a stakeholder in our retail vitality.

[B] Victor Frost: No response from candidate.

[C] Chris Gaither

The city could improve its relations with businesses owners, and show real support in three ways. First of all, the city has to really listen to, and openly communicate with its business shop owners. When many businesses express concern about additional taxation, the city has to do a

better job of understanding the financial concerns of those businesses. Just as the city is facing revenue short falls due to the current economic situation, businesses are facing the same challenges. Businesses are not opposed simply because they don't want to pay. They might not be able to pay anything more or they will break. The solution cannot be to simply request higher direct fees from businesses to support the city's budget deficit. Particularly when those additional required fees do not provide any extra services to the businesses, there will be understandable reluctance from the business owner. The main thing the city needs to do here, is keep open ties with the business owners, and when asking for such fees to clearly demonstrate and highlight what the business will gain in return. People respond better if there is a WIFM (what is in it for me). Secondly, for businesses that rent space, the city should create a mediation ordinance or system, just like they did for residential renters so that business owners can seek city support in negotiating lower or stable rents for leasing commercial space. Currently, you can really feel the effects of the escalating commercial vacancy rates especially in the downtown area. Such a mediation approach between commercial landlords and renters could help to mitigate the loss of retail businesses due to rent concerns. Sometimes, with all that a small business has to do, it is not always easy to be your own advocate for rental negotiations. The city gains in revenue terms if it can help more businesses stay afloat due to commercial rental issues, and the business gains by staying in business. Reasons for drastic rent increases should be supported by economic and expense factors, not just a desire to have more money for the space. Lastly, the city council should have a committee or representative assigned to meet with local business owners on a monthly basis to do strategic planning with respect to city wide business concerns. For example, why do we have a Sit and Lie ordinance in the downtown area of Palo Alto, and in front of Whole Foods, and it does not extend to other business areas of Palo Alto? Why would you have a selective ordinance and not one that is enforced throughout the city? This opens the door to selective and discriminatory enforcement, as we are currently witnessing some businesses in one location being asked to pay fees for outside tables and chairs that others are not being required to pay. An ordinance like this should either apply to all business areas, or no zones at all.

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

Follow the best practices of other towns and get our act together. We have several neighboring cities that can show us the way.
