

Liz Kniss Replies to 2016 City Council Candidate Questions

1. **Reason for running:** What are the top three goals you want to achieve in the next four years on the city council?

When re-elected my priorities will be:

- Transportation
 - Continue to champion our Transportation Management Agency (TMA), an organization that serves as an official means for controlling traffic in and out of the city. I spearheaded the creation of TMA in Palo Alto.
 - Electrify Caltrain and identify funding for grade separation projects
- Housing
 - Near transit
 - Affordable
 - Diverse types for all generations
- Health and safety
 - Implement our Parks and Open Space Master Plan
 - Drive projects that reduce traffic, create safe bike lanes and improve pedestrian safety
 - Support youth mental health initiatives including Project Safety Net.

2. **Experience:**

Non-incumbents: Describe your personal experience with Palo Alto City government and recent issues that have come before public hearings at the city council or other board and commissions. 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 (Kniss): What have been your major initiatives on the Council? Describe your role and the results.

The residential parking permit program (RPP). This was a major issue when I ran in 2012 and I feel we have now made a good start in the downtown area. As we move towards RPP programs in Evergreen and Southgate neighborhoods.

TDM. A former colleague and I first learned about these programs in 2013 where they function successfully in the east bay. We have now been using some form of this at Stanford, in the Research Park, and the first stages have begun in the downtown area in this past month. This includes using Scoop (a ride-sharing app), Go Passes for low wage income workers and measurements regarding its success should be out by December.

Valet parking. There are three garages now offering valet parking to lessen the impact on the side streets.

3. **Affordable Housing:** Regarding building affordable housing, we are faced with several problems: lack of land, lack of interest on developers' part and the cost (one unit costs \$400-600,000). Please address:

- How do we get such housing built?
- Can we even build enough housing to satisfy demand?
- Should the City increase development fees to fund more affordable housing?

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- How do we get such housing built?
 - a) Government subsidized housing done through Palo Alto Housing Corp, Eden Housing or MidPen utilizes government funding through city-in-lieu funds, state funds, government funds, HUD, and tax credits. It of course depends on land being available.
 - b) BMR units as part of a building project. I have been very supportive of the collaborative effort between the City of Palo Alto, Santa Clara County, and others in the ongoing effort to prevent the displacement of over 400 low-income residents at the Buena Vista Mobile Home Park. This is a good example of low income, high density housing. I proudly voted to commit approximately \$14 million to help keep these families in our community. Also, I have been supportive of efforts to improve housing options near transit, including smaller units and below market rate (BMR) homes.
 - c) In-lieu funds collected by the city to be used for housing development needs, such as Buena Vista. Buena Vista was funded with \$14 million of city funds, \$14 million from county affordable housing funds, and the Santa Clara County Housing Authority.
- Can we even build enough housing to satisfy demand?

No.
- Should the City increase development fees to fund more affordable housing?

Yes.

4. **High-density housing:** What are your thoughts on "high-density housing" in Palo Alto? How much should be built and for whom?

This is completely dependent on the land available, zoning requirements, and proposals made by developers. In our housing element, we have identified available housing sites. However, the city does not build housing, rather, the city responds to requests for high-density and at that point an application would be made to the city to be voted on by the city council. I believe we need additional housing for low-wage earners, our teachers, police, firemen, and city workers, as well as the elderly who would like to downsize. There are long waiting lists for senior housing options in this city.

Last May, when there were opportunities for low income senior housing available in Palo Alto, there were 100s of seniors on the wait list for rental apartments.

I have been very supportive of the collaborative effort between the City of Palo Alto, Santa Clara County, and others in the ongoing effort to prevent the displacement of over 400 low-income residents at the Buena Vista Mobile Home Park. This is a good example of low income, high density housing. I proudly voted to commit approximately \$14 million to help keep these families in our community. Also, I have been supportive of efforts to improve housing options near transit, including smaller units and below market rate (BMR) homes.

5. Jobs/Housing Imbalance: Office creation is outpacing housing development. Please address:

- How much, where *and what kind of* office space can Palo Alto sustain?
- Do you support extending the annual office space development cap?
- Should the City consider placing a moratorium on new office development?

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- How much, where *and what kind of* office space can Palo Alto sustain?

In 1986 a Downtown Palo Alto study was done. As a result of the study, city council established a 10% cap, which equaled 350,000 sq ft of office development. We have not reached that figure as of this summer. We currently have a limit in the downtown area of 50,000 sq ft per year. In the last year, we did not reach that limit, as in, we are below the allowable cap.

- Do you support extending the annual office space development cap?

If this applies to the downtown cap of 50,000 sq ft per year, yes, I am in support.

- Should the City consider placing a moratorium on new office development?

There is currently a strict limit on commercial growth of 50,000 sq ft per year and in the last year we actually limited new office development by approving projects that came in under the cap.

6. Growth: There has been a lot of discussion about the demand for housing as well as potential impacts, and how fast it should increase in Palo Alto. How does this compromise the quality of life of local residents, including school enrollment, and what mitigations do you support?

Our current average is roughly 150 new dwelling units per year. We are in compliance with the guidelines of the housing element, which is state law that requires us to identify housing sites every 7 years.

Currently, there is a 20% decrease in enrollment at the kindergarten level. This could mean that it is getting harder for young families to move into Palo Alto and we should consider the long term impacts of smaller schools which would ultimately offer fewer options for our students.

Our current population is about 65,000 and there has been very little growth over the past five years.

7. Cumulative Impacts: Commercial projects are evaluated on an individual basis, without looking at the cumulative impact on intersections, traffic and spillover parking in neighborhoods. Many traffic studies seem to have a finding of “no impact,” yet traffic continues to get worse. What changes in the way we evaluate projects would you favor?

I am open to modifications to our evaluation process or consider using another company/methodology. The question is an important one. On a broader level, our comprehensive plan and area plans should focus more on systems thinking about how the totality of development, jobs, school commutes etc., contribute to traffic.

8. **Local Review:** What is your opinion of the Budget Trailer Bill 707's (or similar bills) by-right exemption from environmental review?

Our city council took a strong stand of opposition to this preemption of local control. As President of the Peninsula Division of League of California Cities, I joined my colleagues from many other cities to defeat this bill which would have given the state control over our local governing bodies. While affordable housing is an important priority for our state, region, and city, our local processes such as review by our Architectural Review Board and Planning & Transportation Commission are important city functions which should not be preempted by the state. One size does not fit all, and Sacramento should remember that.

9. **Retail:** How would you support local retail? Specifically, how would you protect, support and possibly even extend ground-floor retail in our commercial and neighborhood commercial areas? How would you enforce existing laws?

I support retail, which provides important revenue for our city budget, contributes to a sense of community and local pride, provides needed products and services to Palo Alto residents, and helps reduce car traffic by allowing people to make a short trip instead of driving to another city for their shopping. I voted recently to protect the retail operations that exist. In certain areas, we don't allow any current retail spaces to convert to office and I support that.

It should remain a priority for the city to ensure community and neighborhood-serving retail is retained and supported. Retail works in some areas better than others, but we should be very careful and skeptical when hearing requests for exceptions

10. **Accessory Dwelling Units (aka "Granny Units"):** Do you support zoning changes to enable the creation of additional second units, such as reduced minimum lot size, removal of parking requirements? If so, which ones? How do ensure these units don't simply become short-term (Airbnb-type) rentals?

We need to look very carefully at zoning changes before altering any existing zoning and weigh the overall impacts.

Before altering any existing zoning rules, we should proceed cautiously and weigh all of the potential impacts, considering both the possible benefits and the possible unintended consequences.

Our Planning & Transportation Commission and City staff are considering the range of proposals to modify these regulations, keeping an open mind. If we facilitate creation of new Accessory Dwelling Units (ADU's) in Palo Alto, we should prioritize those which provide benefits rather than negative impact to the community. For example, an ADU which does not add floor area ratio (FAR) has less impact on the built environment than a free standing structure. If an ADU is made available as a rental home for a teacher, city employee, or as a more affordable rental, that is a potential benefit. But, of course, the impacts must be weighed against that.

Regarding short-term rentals, I think Palo Alto should look carefully at what other communities in our region have done to establish more meaningful regulations, and then decide whether they might be adequate for our community. We don't want to see lots of ADUs, apartments, or normal houses just turned into mini-hotels.

- 11. Parks:** The current Comprehensive Plan calls for the city to maintain 4 acres of in-town park space for every 1,000 residents. The actual ratio is now below this ratio as our population has grown. What should we do?

Palo Alto has more than 36 parks including an exceptional park with 1400 acres, Foothill Park. While we are not always at the suggested average, which would consist of a park within a half mile of every resident, we do come very close.

Our new Parks and Open Space Master Plan, which we are currently working on, will improve our access to safe and enjoyable parks and open space on an even more effective basis. It is a very extensive plan and incorporates discussions about tree protection as well as better maintenance of our park structure.

We recently championed the Magic Bridge addition at Mitchell Park. This park is especially created for those with physical limitations and children who learn differently. We have had many inquiries about it and I am sure it will be duplicated throughout the country.

Additionally, our parks are used by people from the surrounding communities on a regular basis so I believe we do a good job sharing parks, open spaces, access to nature and urban recreation in a regional way. Also, I don't feel that Palo Alto is going to grow in any substantial way over the next few years. We are reasonably stable at about 65,000 residents.

- 12. Dewatering:** What policies should the City set regarding the discharge and loss of water (as well as land settlement problems in neighboring properties) when basements are being built?

First, I would acknowledge the very smart members of our community who deserve tremendous credit for studying this issue carefully and bringing their concerns and suggestions to the City Council in a clear, consistent, and effective manner. This was not a major issue on our agenda a couple years ago, but, thanks to our community, we are now moving forward trying to address it.

There are several related concerns about dewatering. There is the concern about wasting water, especially in a drought. The underlying question here is whether we see groundwater as a waste product, an inconvenience, or a potential resource, especially for emergencies, in droughts, etc. Another concern is the potential for dewatering to cause subsidence and damage to neighboring properties. Yet another concern is the potential harm to trees in our community which have already been stressed by the drought. And there are other concerns as well.

We need better data on Palo Alto's groundwater. In my understanding, the groundwater surveys are not adequate, particularly in mapping how our shallow and deep aquifers interact. We also should continue to explore whether different basement construction techniques can reduce the need for dewatering. In order to address the various concerns, we are trying to take them on in chunks. Our staff has responded well to community and Council concerns, and Policy & Services Committee has been working to move policy recommendations forward to the council in a prudent manner, neither rushing too hastily nor ignoring this critical issue.

13. Single Family Individual Review (includes SSO, Eichler preservation): Please address:

- What type of design guidelines should be developed to preserve neighborhood character?
- Is the current process working?
- If so, give examples. If not, what should be changed?

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- What type of design guidelines should be developed to preserve neighborhood character?
We currently have individual review (IR) and we recently attempted to establish guidelines in the Eichler communities for second stories and I believe this is in process.
- Is the current process working?
The current process to protect single-story overlays involves a democratic vote of those residents living in the designated area, requiring 70% participation. We have protected 12 areas where Eichler tracts are located. The process seems to be effective and the oldest tract was established in the 1990s.
- If so, give examples. If not, what should be changed?
We have protected 12 areas where Eichler tracts are located. The process seems to be effective and the oldest tract was established in the 1990s.

14. Traffic/Commuters: With so much traffic spreading into many neighborhoods, and with a lack of regional transportation plans, what do you propose Palo Alto should do to address employee traffic into town? How do you propose to ease the congestion on our arterial streets — especially during the rush hours — so fewer commuters will try to take unsafe short cuts through our residential neighborhood streets?

We have three ways we are addressing this.

The first is the Transportation Demand Management Association (TDM). Even getting the TMA-going which provides alternative.

Stanford Park Research Park working group.

City shuttles including the Margarite, Stanford's shuttle and safe routes to school to reducing parents driving.

15. Parking (RPP): Do you support an expanded Residential Parking Permit Program? Please address:

- How should it be structured to protect neighborhoods?
- Should neighborhoods get determine which type of program is appropriate for them?
- What alternatives or additional mitigations do you support?
- Will you keep in place the commitment to phase out non-resident parking in the Downtown RPP district in 10 years?

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- How should it be structured to protect neighborhoods?
It exists to protect neighborhoods and we have attempted to structure it, to reduce the impact through enforcement methods.

- Should neighborhoods get determine which type of program is appropriate for them?
Each neighborhood should have a stakeholders group that works with city staff to determine the kind of program that works best in their particular situation.
- What alternatives or additional mitigations do you support?
Transportation Demand Management program (TDM) and valet parking in 3 downtown garages to reduce the impact in that area. With 2 new neighborhoods asking for protection, will need to look at programs such as this to mitigate the impact.
- Will you keep in place the commitment to phase out non-resident parking in the Downtown RPP district in 10 years?
The City Council's current commitment is two-fold: phase out non-resident parking and implement new electronically controlled ways of handling our traffic and related parking. For example, we are currently studying a sensor based parking garage solution that would indicate the available number of spots on a billboard at the entrance, with interior indications of an open spot. Examples of this exist in San Francisco and Santa Monica.

16. Caltrain/HSR: What is your view on Caltrain's electrification plans, High Speed Rail and grade separations?

I believe the electrification of CalTrain is important. A bigger challenge will be to locate the funding for grade separations. The VTA ½ cent tax on the November ballot does include some funding for cities to use for grade separations. For the safety of our children and residents, it is essential to have grade separations.

17. VTA: What will be your strategy in dealing with the VTA to stop their proposed severe reduction of VTA bus service within Palo Alto, and to persuade them instead to improve their service in Palo Alto so more commuters working in Palo Alto will take VTA buses to their jobs in Palo Alto.

I am the only candidate that serves in leadership roles on regional boards, one of which is the VTA Policy Committee and I staunchly argue for and support service to the north county, specifically, Palo Alto.

18. Budget: How do you plan to fund the city's long-term pension and health benefits liability, which currently stands at \$500 million? How serious is the impact of this liability to the City's ability to provide services and amenities to residents?

This is a serious liability. We have a plan in place that is the least impactful to our community because it incorporates our asking the employees to increase their contribution and to add to the general fund on a regular basis. The long-term pension and health benefits liability accounts for about 1/3 or \$156M. CalPers is making changes to funding and these are accelerating the increase on payments. We are looking at finding solutions, rather than impacting services. If you compare head count from 5 years ago it's down. Monitoring and trying to find ways to not increase the unfunded liability portion. In the past we have cut staff and outsourcing services. A 10-year forecast will be presented to the council to guide us and discuss how to address these issues. \$330 million is the liability for the general fund, that combines retirement, medical and pension payments.

19. Stanford: What is the most important aspect of the City's upcoming negotiation with Stanford regarding its General Use Permit?

The City of Palo Alto can only influence the general use permit. While they are in our sphere of influence the county of Santa Clara will negotiate with Stanford and determine the parameters of the final general use permit (GUP).