

The Right Stuff: Our Review of City Council Candidates

Its election time again. Once every two years we get the privilege to choose among a group of candidates—some new, one who ran last election, and an incumbent—to represent us on City Council—in this year’s election we get to choose two. Often we decide on candidates because we like or dislike their position on a particular issue, sometimes we pick them because we personally know the person and, sometimes, without much else to go on, we just guess. Rarely do we take a few steps back and ask the question “what kind of person do we need to complement the existing Council lineup and ensure a functioning City Council?”

Frankly we are most interested in the latter approach. Over the last several years we have watched the current Council become increasingly dysfunctional with long meetings in which no one is willing to forge a consensus, meetings in which items are brought before Council that have not been adequately vetted by staff because Council members are pushing for quick action on pet projects, and a Council which has approved large capital expenditures without the funds to pay for those projects.

The answer to the Council “problem” is multifold. First, it’s important to recognize that being on City Council is a demanding, essentially full-time job. We need candidates who understand how City staff works, who know how to build consensus among others on Council and who will be thorough and thoughtful in their deliberations. We need those sitting on the dais to actually listen to the thoughts and opinions of the community before deciding what is best for the overall good of the town. Most of all, we need Council members who understand what the tradeoffs are when they make decisions and are able to weigh the impacts of those tradeoffs carefully. We don’t want or need bullies who browbeat residents and staff. Secondly, because a major portion of the Council’s business involves land use issues, we need people who have some experience with land use decisions and are able and willing to ask staff and committees/commissions the right questions so that the best decision for the community can be made.

We evaluated candidates on the criteria of 1) understanding how City staff works, 2) the ability to build consensus, 3) the ability to understand what the tradeoffs are in whatever decision is before Council, and 4) experience in land use decisions. We’ve also included, where relevant, some other inputs

Jean Mordo

It’s easier to talk about an incumbent as opposed to someone who’s never been on Council because we’ve had 4 years to see how the incumbent has performed. To his credit, Jean Mordo, currently the Mayor, has moved the Community Center project forward, although there is a strong concern that spending at least \$35 million plus on a project for which the staff and the Financial Commission have recommended a budget of only \$25 million seems to be a poor management decision in which the tradeoffs haven’t really been thought through. As head of the Parking Committee, which was disbanded by judicial order for Brown Act violations, Mordo has been instrumental in allowing that committee to bring forth recommendations that have not had the benefit of staff analysis (see the recent FOLA article entitled *No Place to Park*). Based on some of his comments, it is not clear that Mordo really understands what he is promoting.

The Parking Committee, under Mordo's guidance, was supposed to address the supply of parking in order to improve the downtown-parking overflow. Instead, the committee's recommendations essentially ignored the problem of lack of parking and instead made recommendations that made it easier for developers to build larger buildings without adding any new parking. If those proposals pass it will hurt downtown businesses as well as the residents who want to shop downtown.

While the Visioning Process is important for the future growth and development downtown—growth and development that are inevitable---there is an endemic problem with this Council in that there has been no economic analysis of how to implement the "Vision" without simply selling off Civic Center or parking plaza land (or what Mr. Mordo has termed "monetizing" City assets). By his actions he has clearly prioritized the interest of commercial property owners and developers over that of the greater community.

In large part, the impetus for Measure C has been about trying to provide an ironclad method of requiring consent from Los Altos residents BEFORE allowing the City Council to spend our inheritance (City parks, Civic Center and downtown parking plaza lands) without first checking in with the community. And while many in the community want to see more vibrancy in downtown, we are not convinced that "80% of the community" buy into the vision as Mr. Mordo has stated. More restaurants and activities are a good thing, but do we want our parking plazas to become shopping malls and food courts? Will it decrease our small town atmosphere and perhaps even lead to less vibrancy?

Perhaps last but not least, Jean Mordo is responsible for a great deal of the dysfunctionality of the Council and the intentional circumvention of Council norms, lack of staff work ahead of decisions, and other actions that hurt the effectiveness of the Council. Mordo's biggest failing, based on four years of observation of his behavior on the Council, is the outright bullying of his fellow Council members, the City staff and the public. This behavior is not only unprofessional, it is completely unacceptable. On that criterion alone he should not be re-elected.

Neysa Fligor

Unusual though Neysa's name is, it's a familiar one. Neysa ran for Council 2 years ago and narrowly lost to Lynette Lee Eng. To her credit she now has greater familiarity with the key issues facing the town in this election than she did in the prior one. She gets high marks from many who keep track of politics throughout the county, and that is certainly a plus. We like that she has served on the El Camino Hospital Board-which means she has some experience working with others to sort out complex issues and develop good solutions. Her experience on the Parks Commission has also given her some sense of how the City works. It's unfortunate that she doesn't have broader experience working on committees/commissions that are decision-making entities and that are involved in land use issues. Land use issues are probably the most complex decisions the Council must make, and experience on the Planning Commission or in her prior work dealing with those issues would have been ideal. Neysa is against Measure C and supports the Downtown Vision Plan as adopted.

We hope that Neysa is willing to make a thorough investigation of that Vision Plan to ensure that the City isn't biting off more than it can chew. As in many things, issues are often more complex than at first

glance. We also are glad that she is concerned about downtown parking that is spilling over into residential neighborhoods.

We think Neysa brings two great qualities to the council—a willingness to dig into issues and an ability to work with others. Given the holes in the present Council, Neysa will hopefully be able to fill those gaps and help bring reason, rationality and civility to the Council.

Anita Enander

Anita Enander is not a familiar name to many voters in Los Altos, but she has been working behind the scenes (in a good way) in Los Altos for a number of years. She was on the Downtown Building Committee that reviewed the projects that had been built in recent years and helped develop some additional tools and guidelines for future development. She has served on the Planning Commission since April 2017 and is often the lone questioner about things that don't seem to make sense. Anita provides a strong fact based and analytic approach to decision making. She is pro Measure C (please read the recent FOLA article analyzing Measure C to answer any questions you may have) and has raised valid concerns about the Downtown Vision, including how to pay for it without dramatically changing the character of our downtown and Civic Center. We also like the fact that she is actually thinking about the impact that high-rise developments along El Camino are having on adjoining single family residential neighborhoods as well as traffic impacts, and looking for ways to address those legitimate concerns.

While we don't always agree with her position on certain issues, we believe that the Council needs more and better clear-headed thinking and desire to do the right things for the City. And we believe that she will represent the residents of the community on Council - providing a far better balance than currently exists.

Nancy Bremeau

Nancy Bremeau is a new name to many in Los Altos, although some may know her from the Public Arts Commission where she served for two years. She has also been a voice at Council meetings where she has spoken on issues including the Downtown Vision. Nancy lists a substantial number of community organizations that she belongs to, but it is unclear whether she has actually done anything other than attend meetings at Los Altos Village Association, The Los Altos Chamber of Commerce and Los Altos Community Coalition.

Nancy has been very vocal on the Internet site Next Door over the past couple of years. Unfortunately, her voice has often been aggressive and personal in a negative way when she disagrees with posts of other Next Door contributors. Perhaps that alone would be enough to disqualify her from Council, given that we already have an issue with dysfunctionality, courtesy to fellow council members, and an inability to work together as a team.

In addition, it should be noted that when Nancy was a member of the Public Arts Commission, her attendance record was substantially below what the Council requires, which is attendance of at least 80% of a commission's meetings. For a committee that meets only once a month, this is not a

particularly onerous requirement. This poor attendance record is not a good sign for taking on a City Council position which, as any Council member past or present will tell you, is effectively a fulltime job.

Lastly we are troubled by some of the “accomplishments” she claims in her campaign mailer-including her direct involvement and contribution to the purchase of Lincoln Park by the City. In point of fact, the City did not have residents involved in the purchase. In fact, the City’s discussions, lead by two Council members to purchase the land from the county, began in October 2008, nearly a year prior to Nancy’s move to Los Altos in 2009. There are a number of other claims of her direct involvement in projects such as the First Street Green, teen space at the new Community Center, downtown Performing Arts Center and a Nature Center. While her advocacy for those efforts is laudable, as near as we can tell, her “participation” consisted solely of just that, i.e., advocacy, not direct involvement. There is a huge difference between being a community supporter and being responsible for actually making things happen.

Teresa Morris

Teresa is another relatively unknown name and face in Los Altos. She was on the Downtown Design Review Committee and she has taken a very resident-friendly approach on campaign issues, including downtown development and El Camino multi-family housing. We echo her concerns that the Downtown Visioning process was flawed in many ways and that the end product may not represent the best interest of local residents and downtown businesses. Teresa also supports Measure C.

We think that Teresa would be a stronger candidate if she had more experience on a City commission, something we would urge her to do to broaden her exposure to the City processes and staff.

Our bottom line

This is an important election, as a number of key issues will get decided by the next City Council. We encourage all eligible voters to go to the polls. And please remember it is your City and you need to be concerned about how the City Council represents the best interests of you and your City. And more importantly we need a Council that actually can work together effectively. We believe that **Neysa Fligor** and **Anita Enander** are the two individuals who have the best combination of teamwork skills, civic experience, and demonstrated common sense decision-making capability that will make the next City Council effective in dealing with the many key issues on the horizon.