



Friends of Los Altos, Inc. (FOLA)

A non-profit, non-partisan, volunteer-run organization

Ballot Blues – Election Season is Here, Los Altos Edition

Okay, before you know it election time will be upon us. No, we are not going to discuss the upcoming Presidential election — we would rather see and hear the fights that go on in your extended family than try tangling with anyone we aren't tied to by birth or marriage. Our discussion here is about local politics, for better or worse.

We will try to provide some insight into both the election of Council members vying for the three open seats on the Los Altos City Council as well as the contest for Santa Clara County Board of Education. The what? Okay let us cover the former in this article and the Board of Education in our next.

So FOLA decided to invite each of the seven candidates into the warmth of our Zoom living rooms and learn more about them, their qualifications, their thoughts on what needed to be done in Los Altos and develop our assessment as to how well we thought each would do on Council. We also did a bit of digging around to better understand what fans and critics had to say about each candidate, since many have served on appointed commissions in town.

Overall the candidates are similar in many ways—all have lived in Los Altos for over 10 years, with a majority over 20. All are deeply interested in the future of the City. Many are running because they don't like what they see as the current direction of Council and what they believe as its dysfunctionality. But with that said, each has his or her own take on what that means and what to do to fix it. There are varying opinions of the root causes — ranging from the existing Councilmembers to communication issues among the Councilmembers, and between the Council and the City Manager, between the Council and various Commissions and maybe most important of all, between the Council and the residents. Interestingly most candidates (with the exception of Sally Meadows, Jonathan Weinberg, and Kuljeet Kalkat) are firmly against the proposed Reach Codes, which ban indoor gas appliances in new construction (or tear down remodels). All the candidates were against commercial development on the Civic Center campus, although Alex Rubashevsky indicated that he might consider it if it were housing or offices above a City Hall office or other City facility.

We would encourage you to look at each candidate's website, as well as interviews that have been done by Los Altos Residents Association (LARA) <https://www.losaltosresidents.org/> . LARA interviewed all the candidates, with the exception of Jonathan Weinberg and Sally Meadows, both of whom declined to participate after initially agreeing to do so. The League of Women Voters is also having a candidate forum on October 1st from 7-8:30 pm <https://www.lwvlamv.org/calendar/> .

While we will try to highlight the differences between candidates on specific issues, our primary evaluation criteria are the same as we used in 2016:

- 1) understanding how the City functions, particularly how the staff works,
- 2) the ability to work cooperatively with others and build consensus,
- 3) the ability to understand what the tradeoffs are in whatever decision is before Council, and
- 4) experience in land use decisions.

Given the pandemic's effect on the City's finances and local businesses and the increased role Sacramento legislators are playing in our local zoning laws, we also evaluated how well each candidate would be in:

- 5) understanding and managing the City's financial health,
- 6) providing help to our struggling businesses throughout the City, and
- 7) dealing with demanding (and in our opinion, increasingly unrealistic) State mandated requirements for additional housing in the City, including affordable housing.

So with that very long introduction let's get on to the candidates. We are discussing each of them in alphabetical order (of their last names). And if for some reason you don't want to read this entire article (it is long, given the number of candidates), then please just skip ahead to the last 2 paragraphs. We won't be offended, really!

The candidates are, in alphabetical order:

1. Terri Couture
2. Lynette Lee Eng
3. Kuljeet Kalkat
4. Sally Meadows
5. Alex Rubashevsky
6. Scott Spielman
7. Jonathan Weinberg

Terri Couture

Many people will recognize Terri Couture's name from the back page of the Town Crier. As a real estate agent in town for the past 30 years, Terri has built a reputation as a solid, practical, no-nonsense realtor. Terri is best described as a bit of a maverick—she is financing her campaign herself (primarily because she doesn't want to feel indebted to anyone if elected) and she has no problem saying what's on her mind. Terri is committed to maintaining the charm and character of Los Altos, she's unhappy with State mandated control over local zoning, but supportive of creating additional affordable housing in town. By her own admission she is fiscally conservative. She previously served on the Planning Commission for Santa Clara County from 2010-14 and more recently has been a Hearing Officer for those seeking property tax adjustments from the County. While she has deep roots in town, she has not served on any Los Altos Commissions or Committees. Terri has good connections to the business community and

believes that any downtown development (including those on the parking plazas) should replace and augment any parking that is lost. She currently owns a condominium in downtown, but it is situated far enough way so as to allow her to fully participate in civic center and most downtown decisions. One of her comments stuck with us—“there is way more to keep than to change in Los Altos”. We like that basic philosophy.

Lynette Lee Eng

Lynette Lee Eng is another familiar name as she is currently on City Council and was the Mayor in 2019. She brings extensive service to Council, from her 4 years serving on Council, to her prior 11 years on the Parks Commission. She has numerous accomplishments, including the Senior Center at Grant Park and the Summer Concert Series. During her tenure on Council Lynette has been a driving force on the 5G ordinance (limiting the location and placement of 5G cell signal booster antennas) as well as advocating for more transparency and better financial management by the City. She worked to rezone City lands to ensure they remain as parks and helped champion the purchase of 999 Fremont Avenue. Lynette has been a strong voice for residents and earned high marks for her work on a number of issues that affect residents.

Lynette, to her credit, was the lone dissenting vote during the discussion to hire Chris Diaz, the outside City Attorney who was hired in 2017 at the urging of Jean Mordo to replace Jolie Houston. Lynette was often critical during Council meetings of Diaz’s work. Under Diaz, the City was served with numerous land use lawsuits and the City’s attorney fees had become excessive. Eventually the rest of the council agreed with Lynette and terminated Diaz as the City Attorney. He was primarily responsible for developing the City’s response to the 40 Main Street application under SB35 for the 5-story development application. The City’s response to that application did not follow the necessary guidelines and it appears that there was a lack of understanding of State Law. As we now know, those actions led to the City’s denial of the building, which has since been overturned by the courts due to the City’s botched response, and the potential for large monetary damages against the City.

While Lynette is sometimes faulted for not being a particularly effective public speaker (English is not Lynette’s first language, so a bit of understanding is in order here), she has been extraordinary effective at doing significant work behind the scenes. Perhaps most importantly, she always comes to Council meetings well-prepared, unlike some Councilmembers.

Kuljeet Kalkat

Kuljeet is relatively unknown person to most in town, despite his 31 years in the city and his 5 years serving on the Finance Commission, twice as chair. He brings extensive business experience in the tech sector along with small business experience (he and his wife owned Cranberry Scoop a decade ago) as well as his current role as a real estate agent. Kuljeet was very vocal about the need for the City to revise its budget as Covid-19 impacted City revenues. He thinks that the City needed (and still needs) to do a bottoms-up budget, something with which we strongly agree.

Kuljeet and others on the Finance Commission were also quite skeptical about the City spending more than the originally estimated \$25M for the Community Center. That advice went

unheeded and the decision by then Mayor Jean Mordo and the prior Council now leaves the City with a shortfall of \$10-\$15 million to complete the Community Center—a not insignificant amount for a City the size of Los Altos. Kuljeet brings a wealth of finance experience and maturity, although he lacks experience with land use issues and legislation, which is a large part of what Council deals with on a regular basis. He does support the proposed Reach codes which would mandate all electric appliances in new construction and all tear down remodels. We found Kuljeet to be intelligent and personable.

Sally Meadows

Sally Meadows is a familiar name to many as she has served on the Design Review Commission for four years and currently serves on the Planning Commission. She has also served on the El Camino Hospital Community Advisory Board. Sally has seen her share of challenging situations as the City has navigated new development projects along El Camino, Accessory Dwelling Unit regulations, and the balancing act between development and concerns of residents. She wants to see better decision making within City government, and an improvement in the relationship between Council and the Commissions.

Sally is intelligent, well-spoken and very knowledgeable about City issues and land use matters. While she had voiced some concerns about new high rise developments, she thinks that this kind of development is inevitable, and is reluctant to push back against developers and the State requirements. Her extensive experience with land use issues and knowledge of how the City functions are big pluses that she brings to her candidacy.

Alex Rubashevsky

Alex Rubashevsky is a new name to most in town. He is a contractor/developer who has grown up in Los Altos. He is interested in increasing the value of the Los Altos housing stock and believes that distributed urban enclaves in town will bring vitality. He supports 3-4 story construction in downtown along State and Main Streets and sees those buildings as an interim step to taller buildings of 5-7 stories over time. He advocates more commercial development in town and wants more streamlined design and approval regulations for construction. When we talked with Alex he had not yet read the Downtown Vision Plan and indicated he had not attended any Council meetings in the recent past. Alex has not served on any City Committees or Commissions and based on our conversations appears to lack some understanding of how the City operates and the roles of various Commissions.

Scott Spielman

Scott Spielman has served on the Parks Commission for the past 1-1/2 years during a tumultuous time with issues like dog parks, bocce ball courts and the fate of Halsey House at Redwood Grove under consideration. He was active in the Measure C effort two years ago and is very focused on the issues and concerns that affect residents. He recognizes that there is a dysfunctional relationship between Council and Staff and believes he can help address that issue. A fiscal conservative, he was not in favor of the pay raises that were granted to City Staff mid-year, while the full effect of the pandemic on the City's budget was still an unknown. He believes that some of the land use issues that are being proposed in Sacramento which remove

local control need to be fought in cooperation with other local cities.

Like many of the other candidates, he brings extensive business experience in the tech sector along with significant work helping others through Kiwanis and other endeavors. Scott is quiet, thoughtful and determined, good characteristics for someone sitting on the dais.

Jonathan Weinberg

Jonathan has lived in Los Altos for 11 years, the least amount of time of any of the candidates (just as an aside, we don't think that the length of residency in Los Altos is necessarily either a plus or a minus on a candidate's resumé) but he has been active in the community, serving on the Parks Commission for the past 3-1/2 years as well as on the committee that selected the architect for the new Hillview Community Center. He is a land use attorney and litigator who spoke to us extensively of his unhappiness with the way the City was approaching land use decisions. He also talked about his track record of obtaining good outcomes for his clients as well as the need for compromise.

Jonathan helped run current Councilmember Neysa Fligor's campaign in 2018 but to our disappointment he was unwilling to share with us who his supporters were or who was on his Campaign Committee. Our concern is that his binary approach to issues (as in "just make a decision on an issue and move on") and his seemingly aggressive nature reminds us to some extent of Jean Mordo, when he was on Council, whose aggressive behavior and impatient nature created an unfortunate climate on the dais. As it turns out Jean Mordo is now actively supporting Weinberg in his Council run, a bit of trivia we learned about subsequent to the interview.

Summary

None of the candidates is perfect, of course, but each one brings a set of skills, experiences and value to their candidacy. In an ideal world we would have 3 candidates who bring the extensive experience on Council and willingness to do the homework of Lynette, the focus on residents of Terri, and the people skills and ability to build consensus of Scott. Combine that with the sharp legal mind of Jonathan and the extensive planning and land use experience of Sally, the financial acumen of Kuljeet and the willingness to try new things of Alex—and you have the perfect candidate. The reality is that we will elect three candidates and we need the three who bring the best experience and approach to our City at what has become a particularly difficult time.

Much to our surprise and in a bit of irony, former Councilmember Jean Mordo, who as Mayor famously ignored the Finance Commission's recommendations (strongly voiced to the Council at the time by the Finance Commission's then chair Kuljeet Kalkat) on setting a reasonable limit on spending for the new Community Center, has apparently had a change of heart as he is now also supporting Kalkat in addition to Weinberg and Meadows.

Our Recommendations

As we look at what the City needs now, we think Council experience, people skills, fiscal conservatism and a resident centric approach are the most important for the Council to

effectively move forward. With the right City Manager and capable Finance Staff, the budget issues of the City can be addressed.

Our top 2 picks are Lynette Lee Eng and Scott Spielman. We think Lee Eng and Spielman bring the right mix of talent and experience to the Council.

For the third seat we have to admit that we were torn between Terri Couture and Sally Meadows . While Meadows brings a wealth of experience and expertise, we also feel that she will be more willing to permit new downtown construction to be at a substantially greater height than most Los Altos residents want, and to favor developers rather than residents in critical land use decisions.

Couture also has considerable land use experience, but primarily as a real estate agent and from her experience on the County level. She clearly has the ability to work with others having been a successful real estate agent for decades. Her ownership of a condo downtown is a negative in terms of ability to vote on all matters (that is, she may have to occasionally recuse herself), but due to the location of the condo, that seems to be of little consequence. The straw vote of our Board was 3/2 in favor of Couture, but we leave it to you to decide. To that end, we encourage you to visit each candidate's website along with some of the recorded interviews and live events that will help showcase the various candidates. No matter the outcome it will add to an already memorable 2020.

Friends of Los Altos

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