



Friends of Los Altos, Inc. (FOLA)

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

So why do our City Council meetings last so long?

Part of FOLA's charter is to keep an ear to the ground in order to keep current on what's going on in our community and what residents are both pleased with as well as unhappy about. One subject, which lies just below the surface but seems to be a constant point for discussion, is why in the world do our City Council meetings last so long? Not only does it seem like they go on forever, but by the time they're over, or at least it seems, it's often past midnight and most of the attendees have departed for a good night's sleep. For a small, mostly residential city of 30,000, we don't exactly have the problems of a San Jose or San Francisco, so what could be taking so much time?

One of the "theories" that residents often propose to explain these long, drawn-out meetings is that the Council is more or less dysfunctional and struggles to make decisions; hence the interminable discussions. Another "theory" is that the Council meetings themselves are poorly organized and poorly run, the result of which is a lack of focus and ability to crisply define a question or problem and suggest possible remedies or solutions.

We didn't exactly buy these two "theories", so we did what folks in Silicon Valley do a lot—look at the data. We looked into the statistics for the length and ending times of Los Altos City Council meetings over the last two City Councils; the Council that operated from November 2018 to November 2019, and the current Council that started in November 2019 to the present. We wanted to see just how long the average City Council meeting was running, both for this Council and for the previous Council (the 2018-19 Council had an especially notable amount of criticism on this issue, which is why we decided to compare it with the current Council).

Out of curiosity, and to see if Los Altos might have exceptionally long meetings, we also looked at the statistics for both meeting length and ending times for our nearby neighbors; Mountain View, Palo Alto, and Cupertino. These three cities also have commercial districts and have a number of issues in common with Los Altos.

The results for the Los Altos City Council, comparing Councils for 2018-19 and 2019-20 are shown in the table below

COUNCIL YR	NUMB OF MTGS	AVG MTG LENGTH (hrs)	AVG END TIME	MTGS ENDING AFTER MIDNIGHT	LATEST END TIME
2019	17	4:42	11:42 PM	4	2:34 AM
2020	11	4:39	11:39 PM	2	1:31 AM

Note that even with four meetings ending after midnight for the 2019 Council, and only two post midnight endings for the 2020 Council, the average meeting time / average ending time for meetings during 2019 and 2020 are nearly identical. One can draw the conclusion that City Council meetings take roughly 4 hours and 40 minutes, no matter who's on the Council or who's running the meeting. Just as a FYI, in 2019 Lynette Lee Eng was a first time Mayor, in 2020 Jan Pepper was a second time Mayor of the City, so experience also doesn't lead to shorter meetings.

Now let's look at how our neighbors in Palo Alto, Mountain View and Cupertino do. We should note that Palo Alto City Council meetings start at 5:00 pm, Cupertino meetings start at 6:45 pm and Mountain View meetings start at 6:30 pm, rather than 7:00 pm as the Los Altos Council meetings do, so we've artificially adjusted the ending times of these meetings to be consistent with a 7:00 pm start for the sake of comparison.

The table below compares Los Altos City Council meeting statistics with our neighbors. In fairness to Palo Alto and Mountain View we should mention that Palo Alto and Mountain View each has seven Councilmembers, while Cupertino and Los Altos each have five. As you might guess, it takes longer for seven Councilmembers to discuss an issue than five, although, ironically, Cupertino is the worst of the four cities for length of meetings and late-ending meetings.

Table for average meeting length, ending time, meetings ending after midnight and latest end time for Los Altos, Palo Alto, Mountain View, and Cupertino.

CITY	YEAR	AVG MTG LENGTH (hrs)	AVG END TIME	MTGS ENDING AFTER MIDNIGHT	LATEST END TIME
Los Altos	2019	4:42	11:42 PM	4	2:34 AM
Palo Alto	2019	5:50	12:50 AM	24	2:15 AM
Mountain View	2019	5:34	12:34 AM	5	3:24 AM
Cupertino	2019	5:30	12:30 AM	Majority past 1:00 AM	4:31 AM

Bottom line – Los Altos seems to be doing pretty well. If we were to begin our council meetings at 5:00 pm, as does Palo Alto, then our average ending time for 2019 would have been 9:42 pm, with only one meeting going past midnight, and that one meeting would have ended at 12:34 am. For those of us who may have complained about how long our council meetings last, maybe we should propose an earlier starting time or just be happy with what we have.

In addition to potentially starting meetings earlier, FOLA also suggests that it may be worthwhile to schedule a special meeting for an issue which is a “hot topic” and may draw a lot of residents to the meeting who wish to speak. If each speaker gets an allocation of only 2 minutes to speak, and there are 50 people who wish to express their opinions or concerns, just the public input portion of the meeting could take over 1-1/2 hours.

Another suggestion would be that the Mayor and the City Manager work together very closely to schedule an agenda that isn't overloaded with time-consuming issues. If Councilmembers know in advance that two or three items on the proposed agenda are going to be very time consuming, it might be better to put off either one or more until the next meeting, or hold a special meeting during the following week to deal with those delayed items. A number of people have noted that often an item will come back to Council a second time because of questions that were unanswered in the initial staff report. While we recognize that the City is minimally staffed, we would encourage the Council work with the City Manager to address this issue.

One thing that does seem certain, however, and is that it really doesn't seem to matter either who's on the Council, who's running the meeting, or what city we compare ourselves with. The results are pretty much the same; namely, City Council meetings take a lot of time, both to prepare for and to participate in.

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