



Friends of Los Altos, Inc. (FOLA)

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

Plain talk.....

City Council and what they actually do and why you should care who gets elected

Many of us in the Los Altos community who have been involved in City government through service on committees, commissions or even as an elected Council member have knowledge and experience about the inner workings of City government. But the vast majority of long time Los Altos residents have little interaction with the City government, and many residents really don't know what the City Council actually does. Many residents are new to the City given the change in our demographics over the past few years who may be in the same situation. This article is for you. For everyone who already knows what the City Council does, please just forward this article along to others in the community.

Who sits on the City Council? Any resident who is eligible to vote can seek office and, if elected, can serve up to two four-year terms (a total of eight years) on the City Council.

Are there any special qualifications required to run for City Council? Is there special expertise required in any areas? What about prior service on a committee or commission?

No, there are no special qualifications. However, many of the most critical matters before City Council involve land use, zoning, and financial matters, so someone with a strong background in urban planning/architecture or who has service on the Planning or Financial commissions has a step up on other candidates who don't have this experience. Because City Council decides on policy matters, prior experience of having served on a City commission is a highly valuable exposure to how the City runs as well as the functioning and duties of the City Staff.

Is the mayor elected by voters? No, the mayor is a rotational position. Every year the City Council elects a new mayor based on seniority and the numbers of votes received in the election.

What does City Council do?

The City Council hires and manages two people, the City Manager and the City Attorney. They decide how to spend the money by setting an annual budget. And they decide what kind of development can happen in the town, along with some other miscellaneous rules.

The City Council, contrary to what many people think, does not run the City. The Council directly hires only two people who work for the City--the City Manager and the City Attorney. The City Manager actually runs the City, hires and fires employees, and manages the budget. And, in fact, the law precludes Council members from directing the City Manager on what specific actions he or she should take, including who he or she should hire and fire. Thus, the day-to-day operation of the City is not the direct responsibility of the Council. The Council's job is to set the annual budget, as well as policies, goals, and propose projects that they believe are important for the City.

The City Manager has the difficult and critical job of actually running the City, and in particular, the hiring and firing of his or her team of employees. The City Manager can bring aboard a great team or mediocre one—that's part of what differentiates a good City Manager from a bad one. A personable, dynamic City Manager, like our current one, Gabe Engeland, can attract good people. A bad City Manager, like several we have unfortunately had in the recent past, make bad hires. And bad hires make poor decisions, and several of those poor decisions have been the basis for lawsuits that have cost the City millions of dollars.

What other matters does the City Council review and approve? The City is required to provide certain services, including police and fire protection, a review and approval process for development, a general plan for the near and long-term development of the City and a housing element (a requirement of the State of California). The City Council, through the budget setting process, determines where money is spent, which projects get funded, and which projects drop to the bottom of the list. That is the legally required minimum the Council has to do. In fact, the City Council will review applications for development and approve them (or not), although legally the Council only has to review them.

The Council selects residents to serve on the various commissions—which include Financial, Parks and Recreation, Library, Public Arts, Historical, Complete Streets, Environmental, Design Review, Planning, Youth, and Senior Commissions. These commissions serve as expert advisory groups to the City Council and make recommendations on specific plans and policies related to their areas of expertise. The actual approval of plans and policies can only be done by the City Council during regularly scheduled meetings. That is, only elected officials can approve or disapprove, in a public meeting, any of the recommendations made by the Commissions.

Policies include things such as development review processes, zoning, design review guidelines, etc. but the actual implementation of those policies is performed by the City Staff. While the Council may review and approve a subdivision or commercial development, significant work has already occurred by the City Staff, reviewed by the appropriate commission which then provides a recommendation to the Council. It's important to note that commissions only provide recommendations—the Council is the only body permitted to make a binding decision on most matters (the Design Review Commission can approve a design but it is appealable to the City Council). Additionally, when an application for a land use development is denied, the decision can be appealed to the City Council.

Are City Council members paid a salary and how many hours a week do they work? The job is paid a \$300 per month stipend as set by the Government Code of the State of California, although, in addition to the \$300 per month stipend, Council members do get health coverage. Dental and vision coverage are also reimbursed up to \$1939 per year and Council members can sign up for one of the City's health plans. The City will cover up to \$566.67 toward the monthly medical premium. So, while the actual pay is minimal, there are substantial benefits available to Council members.

While there is no minimum required amount of time a Council member has to work, between Council meetings every other week, preparation for those meetings, participation on various regional committees and commissions, meetings with resident or other special interest groups, a Council member easily works somewhere between 20-40 hours per week.

Can City Council tell the schools what to do, where students can park their cars, approve

new school buildings? Contrary to what most residents believe, the City Council has absolutely no control over what happens in the school districts K-8 and Los Altos Mountain View School District. Council has no say in what buildings are built, what teachers are paid, how well the schools are maintained, what subjects are taught, what or if students can drive their cars to school, etc. The City can and does regulate parking on residential streets and has restricted parking during school hours around Los Altos High in response to resident complaints.

Does it matter if someone is a Democrat or Republican. What do endorsements from the County party or other organizations really mean? Partisan state and national politics are not part of our local political scene. The City Council is nonpartisan--it should not and, in fact, does not matter whether a candidate is a registered Democrat, Republican, Independent or belongs to another party. Equally important, the endorsement from the County or State party really doesn't speak to the qualifications or position of candidates on local issues. Remember, the State Legislature, which is controlled by Democrats, is taking zoning and planning decisions away from municipalities, a policy with which many local Democrats strongly disagree. So voting for someone just because they have the "party endorsement" may not make sense. We wrote an article on this subject during the 2020 election cycle and would encourage readers to reference that more detailed article on the subject: <https://friendsoflosaltos.org/no-party-this-year/#more-4914>

Can the City Council make sure the cellular carriers provide better wireless service in town and specifically in downtown? Unequivocally no. These are independent companies that make their own decisions on what level of service they will provide their customers. The Council can and does put in place guidelines for the placement of cellular equipment. There are now new Federal regulations that affect cellular repeaters which are primarily for 5G service. Currently Los Altos is served by three large cellular towers, one in town, one in Mountain View and a third in Cupertino. The cellular carriers can make (or detract from) improvements to their service without getting any approvals from the City Council. In the past 4 years there *has been no request of the City Council* that affects your cellular service. For more information, FOLA wrote an article on this topic which you can find here: <https://friendsoflosaltos.org/can-you-hear-me-now/>

How does the City Council affect me and my day-to-day life in Los Altos? For many in town it isn't necessary obvious as to what City Council does that directly affects residents on a day-to-day basis. We don't necessarily think about roads, stop lights, stop signs, cross walks, etc., which need repair on a regular basis, the police and fire departments which are adequately staffed and funded and doing their jobs, and that (maybe this is the most important part) that the sewers work. Less noticeable is the money the City spends on maintaining and upgrading parks, repairing and replacing equipment, and improvements for safe routes to school. The budget, which is set by Council, is the primary mechanism to prioritize and fund which projects get worked on. Many residents aren't aware that the City receives only 11% of property taxes, which represent most of the City source of revenues.

However, it's wise to consider that if your neighbor wants to build a very large home right next to you with windows looking into your back yard, or if a developer wants to put a tall building, or a number of tall buildings, in inappropriate locations, then it is the City Council--and who is on it--that matters quite a lot. The City Council are the ultimate approver or denier of developments, or if the approval is at the commission level, are the ultimate appeal body. Thus,

electing Council members who share your values and vision for what you want Los Altos to be and become is very important.

Best part of being on City Council? Being able to help ensure that the City operates in a way to best serve the community

Worst part of being on City Council? Lots of hard work with little monetary compensation. On any decision half the City will love you, half will hate you, half won't know anything about the issue, and the other half won't care what you do. Sigh. (We know, we know, that's four halves, but you get the point)

Our bottom line? Who you vote to elect for City Council matters. Please take the time to become informed about the various candidates and their position on key issues which can and will affect you, your neighborhood and the City. We have an election for two open spots on the City Council in November and **your vote matters**.

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