



Friends of Los Altos, Inc. (FOIA)

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

The Goose that Laid the Golden Egg

What I learned collecting ballot initiative signatures outside of Draeger's last week

Most of us are familiar with the expression, "killing the goose that laid the golden egg." It's a classic fable by the ancient Greek storyteller Aesop about a man whose goose lays a golden egg daily, but his greed leads him to kill the goose to get all the eggs at once, only to find nothing inside and losing the source of his wealth. The story teaches that being greedy and disregarding your good fortune will leave you with nothing, hence "killing the goose that lays the golden egg".

So, what does this fable have to do with my Easter Sunday spent in front Draeger's Market collecting signatures to put the downtown parking plazas initiative to a resident vote? As it turns out, everything. Bottom line: both Draeger's and the parking plazas are incredible assets to Los Altos and a major draw for both Los Altos residents as well as the broader surrounding community. My newfound understanding is something I am afraid our City Council may be not completely recognize or appreciate. The majority of people, residents, as well as those from surrounding cities are not supportive of plans to eliminate many if not most of the parking plazas. And perhaps even more important, residents want a real say (read that as a vote) on what major changes, if any, occur.

As it turns out, I also attended the City's easter egg hunt on Saturday. The hunt took place at Hillview Park at the Community Center immediately adjacent to town. Here, a consultant hired by the City to update the General Plan was gathering public input. The event was billed as one of four General Plan Community Outreach events, a concept that in principle is a good idea as getting community input should be an important element in crafting any plan. If you are unfamiliar, the General Plan is essentially the "constitution" of the City of Los Altos. A legally mandated long-term blueprint, the General Plan—updated every 20 years—guides land use, physical growth, and policies for housing, transportation, and safety, as well as reflects community values to ensure orderly, sustainable preservation, development, and growth.

But what I saw gave me pause. Instead of asking residents thoughtful questions, the consultant asked anyone who was willing to participate (including 4-year-olds), "What do you love about Los Altos, what is the best thing about it and what makes it unique?" and secondly "What do you wish for Los Altos' future?" No demographics were collected, no questions asked if those responding even lived in Los Altos. Fundamentally feel-good questions were met with largely useless responses. Responses to the first

question on sticky notes included: trees, spin the wheel, library, egg hunt, I love Los Altos, I love my friends, the creek, fun events, sunshine, my school. And to the second question: I like fun everything, a fun playground, kids activities, with a few responses about safer bike lanes, more kid friendly activities, more downtown events. But the key question here is what are we really learning from what is being asked? I participated in the last General Plan update in 2002 as a community member and understand firsthand that an update to the General Plan requires far more than brightly colored sticky notes and simplistic questions. Unfortunately, this is not an isolated “fail” by the City when it comes to getting valid, useful feedback from the community. The City uses staff and outside consultants to collect data about public projects by relying on poorly crafted questions, little to no background information for those responding, and little to no demographic data collection.

The General Plan outreach was eerily similar to the outreach that was done for the Downtown Park project where people (residents and nonresidents alike) were asked what they wanted in a downtown park, without ever asking if they wanted a park and whether or not tradeoffs were acceptable. Important questions such as: “Would you rather have a downtown park or have the City use park funds to make improvements to Grant Park or add a new park in north Los Altos?”. “Do you want the City to convert one of the parking plazas to a park given that 5 of the 10 existing parking plazas might also be converted to other uses?” My question: does the City intentionally direct staff and consultants to ask leading questions so the results fit with a predetermined conclusion? I really don’t know. But I suspect the fairy tale conclusions from these surveys and community outreach events paint an erroneous picture of what the community really values and wants. And most importantly, the City Council buys into those conclusions, even when they hear differently from members of the public at City Council meetings.

After writing the recent article on *Park, or not to park-that is the question* (you can find that article here: <https://friendsoflosaltos.org/to-park-or-not-to-park-that-is-the-question/>), the organizers of the ballot initiative contacted me and asked if I might be willing to help collect signatures on Easter Sunday at Draeger’s. While I was initially reluctant, their pitch to me was that it would give me a firsthand view of how the community felt about the downtown parking plazas. I took the opportunity to really understand how strongly, or not, the community felt about the parking plazas and the city’s plans to replace them with a park, parking garage and other structures

This is where the golden eggs come back in. Not only did I learn about the importance of the parking plazas for Los Altos, I learned how important and valued they were to the greater region, including Los Altos Hills, Portola Valley, Palo Alto, Menlo Park. I also learned a lot about places like Draeger’s Market.

Let me explain a bit more. First a bit about Draeger’s, an independent market celebrating 40 years in Los Altos. More than half the shoppers on Sunday live outside of Los Altos; although I later learned that during the week it is about one half City residents and one-half nonresidents. There were many from the Hills, but also a good number from the surrounding communities. Draeger’s shoppers value the store for its selection as well as its friendly customer service. I know firsthand how nice the people who work there are, whether you are looking for one specialty item or you are a regular shopper. Any significant changes that make it more difficult to shop in Los Altos will not only hurt Draeger’s, but also the downtown merchants. People drive from all over to shop at Draeger’s and to shop in town because

access is easy and the town is charming. Make it harder to park and shop and you hurt downtown merchants, most whom are local small businesses that define our quintessential Main Street USA look and feel. Our merchants are thriving while many other small towns have gone extinct. Why risk killing this goose?

The second observation was that while many Draeger's customers may not live in the City of Los Altos, those who live in unincorporated Los Altos or in Los Altos Hills are equally shocked and dismayed at the plans which would eliminate parking plazas and replace them with a park and parking garages. Even more surprising was that nearly all of the Los Altos residents who were registered voters (and thus able to sign the initiative), signed the petition without pause. They, too, are dumfounded that the City would consider doing away with the parking plazas. The often-heard comment was "what are the people on City Council thinking?!"

Hopefully registered voters will help get the **Los Altos Downtown Parking Plazas Ordinance** on the November election ballot by signing the initiative petition by April 30th. While the City Council may seek data through questionable charettes by poorly-informed consultants, the Draeger's data suggest Council and Staff are badly out of touch with the community. Residents aren't buying what is echoing at City Hall. The Los Altos community is smart; we understand the difference between reality and a fairy tale. And right now, residents don't think the story from the City is all it's cracked up to be.

And that is the way I see it.

Jon Baer

President, Friends of Los Altos

P.S. The volunteer citizen group collecting signatures for the ballot initiative will be at Draeger's Market daily from 4-6 pm through the April 30th. They will also be at other locations throughout the City, including Trader Joe's and Andronico's as well as downtown. To find a location to sign the voter initiative petition, go to www.forlosaltos-now .

Friends of Los Altos

Los Altos, CA 94022 & 94024

<https://friendsoflosaltos.org>