



## **Friends of Los Altos, Inc. (FOLA)**

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

### **Why?**

A seemingly simple question, often asked by small children. It's also a question we hear with increasing frequency from Los Altos residents.

As the Board of Friends of Los Altos, we reach thousands of residents through our newsletter and website. Over the years, we have received hundreds of questions about what is happening in our city across a wide range of subjects. Increasingly, however, those questions boil down to one word:

#### **Why?**

Why is the City Council doing \_\_\_\_\_?

You can probably fill in the blank yourself.

We recognize that serving on City Council is challenging. Council members must balance competing priorities, comply with state mandates, and make difficult decisions. But many of the questions we receive concern matters that are very much within the Council's discretion. They reflect a growing perception that City Hall is no longer listening to the community it serves.

#### **Why ask for community input if it is ignored?**

Why does the City spend so much money on surveys, consultants, and collecting resident feedback, only to ignore much of that input? Why are presentations to Council often framed as though they represent community sentiment when many participants feel their views have been discounted?

If the City genuinely wants to understand resident priorities, why rely on self-selected surveys instead of statistically valid polling—essentially a mini-election? And when residents are asked for their opinions, why aren't they given sufficient background information, context, and the tradeoffs among the alternatives so they can provide informed feedback?

For a town built on community involvement, why is City Council reducing the role of commissions and the number of residents serving on them? Why have many commissions' once-

substantive Annual Work Plans been diminished to activities like essay contests and meet-and-greets rather than meaningful policy work?

When residents express concerns that Council is not adequately considering community input, why is the response so often one of four things?

1. "We have a mandate."
2. "This isn't a democracy—you elected us to make these decisions."
3. "It is the same group of 6 people who do not represent the community"
4. "Your comments are a personal attack."

Or, alternatively, that residents raising concerns simply do not represent the majority. Good governance requires listening to both the minority and majority, although figuring out which is which is often difficult given how few residents actually participate in city meetings and surveys. Informal polls like the Town Crier ran questioning whether the City Council or voters should decide on a downtown park had 80% in favor of Los Altos voters making the final decision.

### **Why these spending priorities?**

Why did the City prioritize spending more than \$2.5 million in Park Funds—funds intended to improve existing parks and create new parks where facilities are lacking—on designing a downtown park and parking garage when many residents do not support the project?

At the same time, why has comparatively little funding and attention been devoted to repairing, maintaining, and improving the parks we already have?

Why does the City continue to focus on new, high-profile projects when many residents consistently say they simply want excellent basic services: beautiful parks and open space, clean streets without potholes, responsive police and fire services, and careful stewardship of taxpayer dollars? And why has there been little to no progress on moving forward with a new police station as our existing one at the Civic Center is long past its functional life?

### **Why pursue projects that divide the community?**

Why does the City propose spending millions of dollars to remove the mature trees along San Antonio Road to accommodate a bike lane on one of the city's busiest and most challenging corridors?

An alternative bicycle route—the Los Altos Loop—already exists. Many cyclists recognize San Antonio Road as a difficult roadway even under the best of circumstances. Bollard-separated bike lanes may create new maintenance challenges, complicate emergency response, and introduce new safety concerns. Have we forgotten the lessons of the Cuesta Road project?

Why, after residents qualified a voter initiative to give the public a direct voice over changes to the downtown parking plazas, did Council immediately begin discussing the possibility of upzoning residential neighborhoods for higher-density housing?

To many residents, that response appeared less like planning and more like an attempt to discourage support for the initiative. Meanwhile, significant underutilized properties—including large downtown parking lots owned by the Packard Foundation and another privately owned lot behind State Street Market—remain largely absent from these discussions. Since the Housing Element already includes numerous privately owned properties throughout the city without requiring owner consent, why are these logical opportunity sites overlooked while residential neighborhoods become the focus?

And why does the City Council and city staff allow surveys and input from both residents as well as nonresidents, without separating out the responses? On a consistent basis, consultants have asked about downtown parks and general plan issues without determining who is responding. We welcome the input from those who do not live in town, but it needs to be clearly identified so the responses can be put in context. At a recent City Council meeting several council members were perplexed as how the consultant could do that. We think it is a very simple question upfront-what city do you live in; if Los Altos, are you in the city or county?

And why does it appear the biggest influence on the City Council isn't residents, but a small group of downtown property owners and their supporters who want to change the city? That question really strikes at the heart of the tension that has existed in Los Altos for decades. Most of the current residents weren't here when in the late 1970's thru the mid-1990's the City Council was dominated by pro-development council members who allowed growth without regard to the consequences. Today we have a council that is once again supportive of growth with little regard to residents or the downtown business owners, encouraged by many of the same property owners run the misleadingly titled group Los Altos Community Voices. The "voices" aren't those of most residents but are coming from a small group of people and organizations that have lobbied the City to reduce parking requirements and resisted city efforts to have them pay for parking in support of new development, for which many are beneficiaries.

### **Why redefine what residents value most?**

Why does City Council appear to prioritize growth and modernization when so many residents chose Los Altos precisely because of its unique small-town character, tree-lined neighborhoods, and sense of community?

And why does the City Council believe that respecting those characteristics that make the town unique and special somehow mean that doing so is an intentional impediment to meeting state mandated housing requirements?

In fact, it is possible and desirable, to figure out how to keep the things we value while allowing the growth and change that are required. It means balancing the rights of those who currently live here with the housing that is inevitable. No one wants to live next to a McMansion. That applies regardless of whether it is a single-family residence (for which we have rules to prevent that from happening) or a multifamily residence (for which we currently do not apply the discretion that state law allows). More housing must be allowed by state law, but it cannot be a blank check when the state doesn't require it.

## **Why has a narrative emerged suggesting a divide between longtime and newer residents?**

The residents who have lived here for decades helped build outstanding schools, beautiful parks, independent police and fire services, and the qualities that make Los Altos one of the most desirable communities in California. They continue to volunteer, mentor, donate, and contribute to civic life, paying it forward to the next generation of residents.

Why suggest that these residents are somehow standing in the way of “progress” or depriving younger families of opportunities? Why insult those who value history, nature, and neighborhood character with labels such as “toxic nostalgia”?

We value the input from everyone. But the city council rationale that it is more important to get the input from the younger demographics since they will be around at the end of the General Plan update in 2046 strikes us as nonsense. The data suggests that many if not most of those in the younger demographics will not live in Los Altos at that time. For some it will be based on the cost of housing, for others it will be a choice as to where they work and live. What we do know is that many if not most of the residents currently 30 and up will still be living in Los Altos over the next 20 years. And meeting the needs of that population—which represents nearly 70% of residents is being discounted.

A healthy community should welcome new ideas without the City Council engaging in ageism and disregarding the wisdom and experience of those who helped build it.

## **Why does this matter?**

These questions are not coming from a handful of residents.

More than 3,000 people signed an initiative seeking to require voter approval before major changes are made to the downtown parking plazas. Residents lined up—sometimes six people deep—to sign petitions opposing a proposal to give County Fire our City owned fire station properties.

Those actions reflect something more significant than disagreement over individual projects. They suggest a growing lack of confidence that residents' voices are meaningfully influencing City Hall's decisions.

We have heard the word *mandate* used repeatedly to justify Council actions. Elections certainly confer the authority to govern. But effective governing also requires listening, adapting, and earning the community's continued trust between elections.

Our request to the current City Council is simple.

Please listen more. And insult less.

Find ways to accommodate a broader range of voices and the knowledge and experience they bring. Truly consider and incorporate the views of both the majority and the minority—in Los Altos, it is sometimes difficult to know which is which.

Really understand what preserving our unique town DNA means and don't view that as an impediment to growth and change, rather view it as a necessary requirement to preserve what the community values.

Encourage community participation rather than viewing it as an obstacle. A stronger community is built when residents feel heard, respected, and included in the decisions that shape their city.

That has long been the Los Altos way and reflects Los Altos values.

And frankly, it won't just make you better elected officials. It will make you better neighbors. And make for a better city.

Why not?

And that is the way we see it.

Friends of Los Altos, Board of Directors

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