



Friends of Los Altos, Inc. (FOLA)

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

Do You Trust the Los Altos City Council to Do the Right Thing? We want to, but you need to decide for yourself

We live in a small, well-educated town. Those we elect to the City Council are often people we know—familiar faces we see around town. We may even know them as neighbors or friends.

For perhaps 80% of the Los Altos community, we aren't even really sure what our city government is doing. But we inherently trust that they are doing things in our best interest as a community. After all, we elected them, so they should be serving our interests.

We read about the politics that go on elsewhere—Sacramento, New York City, or Washington. Some of us are even active in politics at the national level. But by and large, we are convinced that, as a small town, we are immune to the scandals, back-room politics, and lack of transparency that plague many political venues.

But in the past few years there has been more divergence between the City Council and many of the residents who show up to speak or provide written comments to items on the council agenda. And it seems to some, perhaps many, that the City Council is not representing the views of the broader community as it had in the past. And the compromises that had been made to address resident concerns have been replaced by an unwillingness (and at times an inability due to State laws) to find common ground.

We have a simple label for that: **toxic nostalgia**.

Others might use that term to describe our Mayberry-like town. We believe it may apply to our politics of late.

Why the Change?

Why has this changed from the past?

Big money, big politics, and even bigger stakes are at play today—perhaps more than ever before.

Our town has gone from being a poor cousin to Palo Alto, Los Altos Hills, Menlo Park, and Portola Valley to becoming a magnet for those looking for great schools and a real community.

Home and land prices are through the roof, and the stakes are much higher than they used to be. State law has also suddenly made developable land more valuable.

Who owns the largest tracts of land in our downtown?

The City owns approximately 10 acres. Los Altos Community Investment, owned by Anne Wojcicki, has an acre of land composed of numerous parcels along First Street as well as numerous other properties throughout the downtown including a substantial portion of Plaza 9. The Packard Foundation, which owns its building, the acre of parking lots across the street, and an empty parcel along San Antonio Road. And Taycon Properties, owned by Adam Levin whose holdings, totaling about .4 acres includes a prime parcel at Le Boulanger, a lot on Main Street and the Town Crier property. Jeff Morris developed and owns the property at 400 Main Street which is .75 acre. The Corrigan brothers own several properties along San Antonio Road, including the Sereno office building which is .5 acres. Kim Cranston owns at least 5 parcels of land along Main Street totaling .4 acres and Bart Nelson owns a prime corner lot at Main and Second. Additionally, the two supermarkets in downtown, Safeway and Draeger's own 1.7 and 1 acre of land respectively.

As such, each of these entities is sitting on a veritable fortune of valuable land. For some the land is an integral part of their business, for others it represents property that is developable. And State law has made all of the downtown land, including our parking plazas potentially fair game for large scale development. And just for the sake of clarity, we know of no plans by Packard Foundation or either supermarket to do any redevelopment on their respective properties.

So, back to the question raised in our title: Given all the competing interests and priorities, can we trust the Los Altos City Council to make the right decisions?

In our view, government works on the basis of **good process, mutual respect, and trust.**

Our rules and ordinances are supposed to ensure that City staff and the City Council follow a good, prescribed, and transparent process. Public discussion and debate are built into that process. That is why we have City Council meetings where the public is allowed to provide comments and input into the decision-making process. We may not always agree on what should be done, but the meetings, staff reports, and community input are to designed so everyone is working with the same information. But the goal is to reach a decision that, while everyone may not agree, the facts and rationale support the outcome; it engenders mutual respect.

And finally, there is **trust.**

We trust that our City staff and City Council are acting in a responsible, open, and ethical manner, with the goal of making the best decisions for the overall community.

At least, that is the way it is supposed to work.

Let's look at each of these three principles.

Good Process

We have recently seen examples that raise questions about good process and appropriate ethics.

Consider the two fire stations and the land that were given to County Fire.

According to the Assistant City Manager, other options—including leasing the land to County Fire—weren't really considered.

At a recent Council meeting, one Council member angrily accused residents questioning the City-brokered deal of misconstruing what happened.

But the City never, in open session, discussed giving away the land. Nor was any analysis shared with the community explaining the tradeoffs between leasing the land and simply giving the property away, presumably in exchange for lower payments to County Fire.

Where was the public discussion? Where was the analysis? Where was the opportunity for residents to weigh the alternatives?

This lack of transparency is inexcusable.

Consider another example.

Why has a Council member given a public presentation to an advocacy group about Measure D, raising concerns about the measure, when the City isn't supposed to take a position on ballot measures?

The claim that he was merely acting as a resident and expressing his own view rests on shaky ground.

A Council member who uses his position on the Council while advocating on an issue that the City itself is not supposed to take a position on raises legitimate questions about where the line is between acting as a private citizen and acting as a representative of the City.

If that distinction has become blurred, something is broken in our town.

Mutual Respect

Residents are supposed to follow a code of good conduct when speaking at City Council meetings, and, with very rare exceptions, they follow those rules.

But there are numerous examples of Council members berating residents, asking questions that to many observers look like an attempt to intimidate, and being openly hostile to residents who file an appeal—often regarding a multifamily development in their neighborhood.

Since when did disagreeing with someone warrant an attack from an elected representative of the people?

Why are residents who exercise their right to appeal treated as though they have done something wrong?

Residents should not have to agree with the Council.

And Council members should not expect all residents to agree with them but should not berate residents for the difference in opinion.

That is the point of public discussion and debate.

Mutual respect doesn't mean agreement. It means recognizing that residents have a right to question, challenge, and disagree with their elected representatives without being attacked or intimidated for doing so.

Trust

This may be the most important issue of all.

A lobbyist appeared before the State Senate to endorse Los Altos as a co-sponsor of a State Senate bill earlier this year. When asked how a lobbyist could speak for the City without Council approval, the City responded that the City Manager had been authorized to look at replacement options for the police stations, including hiring consultants to assist with different revenue options. It appears that included hiring a lobbyist who spoke on behalf of the City on that legislation which was subsequently signed into law.

How do we trust a City Council that co-sponsors SB 762, which permits the City to raise our sales and use tax—with a majority vote of the community—without the matter ever having been discussed at a City Council meeting?

We are rather surprised that such authorization would include allowing the City Manager or a consultant to co-sponsor a State Senate bill without the explicit approval of the City Council.

Where is the transparency? Where is the public discussion? Where is the accountability?

Then there is the downtown performing arts center.

Can you trust a City Council that says it will not fund a downtown performing arts center, then gives the group \$300,000 for fundraising and publicly considers committing millions more to construction and eventual operating expenses?

All for a project that claimed it wouldn't require any City funds.

Again, the issue isn't whether the project is good or bad.

The issue is whether we can trust what our elected officials tell us.

Our City Council says their hands are tied because of State housing mandates, yet they have opted to add more housing than required to get a housing friendly designation from the State. This will result in more housing and taller and higher density projects, albeit with potentially some State grant money for affordable housing projects.

The City Council refused to sign on in support of the Murietta Resolution, which calls on the League of California Cities to form a working group to study a state constitutional amendment or ballot initiative that restores and protects final local authority over housing and land use decisions. That resolution was passed a few days ago by the resolutions committee of the League 40-3 and the entire League Assembly voted to approve it by an overwhelming majority.

The City Council has chosen not to join the fight to regain local control over land use decisions but continues to blame the State for the ensuing results.

And then there are the downtown parking plazas.

The City said it would use two parking plazas for affordable housing and require developers to replace the 266 parking spaces, as well as provide onsite parking for the new residents.

Then the City turned around, declared the land surplus, and backed off the requirement to replace the lost 266 parking spaces.

And then came an attempt to finesse the situation by claiming that the developments being considered for the three parking plazas are “parking neutral”—while omitting the fact that there will be a parking shortage caused by the Plaza 7 & 8 housing projects.

How are residents supposed to have confidence in the City's numbers when the definition of “available parking” can change depending on what the City wants to do?

We Want to Trust Them

We trust our City to give us the facts.

We trust our City to be open to discussion and debate about what to do.

We trust our elected officials to follow good process.

We trust them to treat residents with respect.

And we trust them to act openly, responsibly, and ethically in the best interests of the entire community.

But we seem to be living in a time when **facts are fluid, discussion is stifled at best, and residents are increasingly subject to the whims of our “leaders.” And decisions are made ignoring public input and community concerns.**

Maybe our little Mayberry never really was as simple as we thought.

Maybe toxic nostalgia has blinded us to what is happening in our own backyard.

But one thing should not change:

Our standards for democracy.

We should demand good process.

We should demand transparency.

We should demand mutual respect.

And, above all, **we should demand that our elected officials tell us the truth and give us the opportunity to see, question, and debate the decisions they make in our name.**

Mayberry may be dead. But our standards for democracy shouldn't be.

We need to make sure our voices are heard clearly when it comes to important matters in our City. And we think residents need to think about these issues as they decide who to elect for city council member and how they vote on the upcoming ballot measure.

And that is the way we see it.

Friends of Los Altos Board of Directors

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