

Palo Alto council race draws 14

Business tax, high-speed rail top candidates' priority lists

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Fourteen Palo Altans, ranging from a planning commissioner to a panhandler, have qualified to run for city council this fall.

John Hackmann, an attorney, was the last of the candidates to qualify for the ballot, turning in his papers to the city clerk a day before Wednesday's 5:30 p.m. filing deadline.

Brian Steen, Chris Gaither and Corey Levens also filed their documents in the past week, joining Nancy Shepherd, Greg Scharff, Leon Leong, Mark Weiss, Tim Gray, Dan Dykwel, Gail Price, Larry Klein, Victor Frost and Karen Holman in what looks to be a wide-open race.

They'll compete for five open seats on the nine-member council. With Klein the only incumbent running for re-election, at least four new faces are guaranteed to be elected come November. Council members Yoriko Kishimoto and Jack Morton are termed out, and Mayor Peter Drekmeier and Council Member John Barton said they won't run again.

Klein is a known quantity, having served three terms on the council already. He has helped lead the city's push to reduce its carbon emissions, and this year he backed a new business tax along with some cuts to balance the city's budget.

Some of the challengers will also be familiar to local voters. At least four have run for city council before, and several have served on local boards and commissions.

Other candidates were motivated to run for the first time by divisive issues such as the business tax, the planned high-speed rail line or Palo Alto's development process.

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Victor Frost, a longtime local panhandler, has become a fixture in recent city council races, though he often finishes last. This time he's battling both the city's sit-lie ordinance — which makes his “mobile campaign headquarters” on the sidewalk across from Whole Foods illegal — and allegations that he doesn't meet the residency requirement for council members. Once home-less, Frost now has an apartment in Redwood City paid for by the San Jose-based nonprofit InnVision, though he insists he still sleeps in his car in Palo Alto. Karen Holman, a member of the city's planning and transportation commission, barely missed making the council in 2005. She ran sixth in that race for five seats, just one-third of a percentage point behind Morton and half a point behind Barton.

Dan Dykwel, a Realtor and past president of the Palo Alto Council of PTAs, can relate. He finished fifth in a four-person race in 2007, one point behind Council Member Greg Schmid.

That was a better showing than Tim Gray, who placed eighth in that election. A business consultant, Gray said he's running more to shed light on certain issues than to rack up votes.

Not so for Greg Scharff, a lawyer who said Wednesday he's “in it to win.” Scharff said he's worried about the local effects of building a highspeed rail line, especially the potential for eminent domain takings in the Southgate neighborhood. He's also opposed to the a business license tax that the current council recently voted to put on the November ballot.

John Hackmann and Leon Leong, another Realtor, are also firmly in the anti-business tax camp.

“When you go downtown you see quite a few open storefronts,” Leong said. “I don't think the proposed business license tax is the best way to go about bringing new businesses into town.”

Residents who object to recent development trends in the city will also find sympathetic candidates. Among them is Nancy Shepherd, a managerial accountant and, like Dykwel, a past president of the Council of PTAs.

On the other side of the issue, at least two candidates have suggested the city's development process is already too onerous at times: Chris Gaither, a volunteer and former manager of the low-income apartment complex The Sheridan, and attorney Corey Levens.

Gail Price, a former school board member, brings a different perspective to the development debate as a former city planner for Sunnyvale and transportation planner for the VTA. She said her experience makes her a good fit for the council at a time when the city is grappling with high-speed rail and other major projects.

High-speed rail is also high on the priority list for Brian Steen, a conservationist who could assume Drekmeier's environmentalist mantle if elected to the council. He has been a vocal advocate of putting the tracks underground.

Mark Weiss, a concert promoter, is one of the few whose focus lies outside of the city's recent hot-button issues. He said he's running as a champion of the local arts scene.

Each voter will be asked to choose five candidates on the Nov. 3 ballot. The top five vote-getters will be elected regardless of whether they win a majority.