

State of the City Address

by Mayor Dena Mossar
April 28, 2003

We are so blessed to live in Palo Alto!

After traveling and talking with people from across the country, I know that Palo Alto is the envy of others.

We offer more services and programs than most cities can imagine. We have healthy financial reserves, a balanced budget and our own utilities. We have limited debt and a triple-A bond rating.

We have an active, engaged community that is willing to help those most in need so that they can better their lives. We have worked to build strong neighborhoods, and supported a vibrant local economy, necessary to fund our services and programs.

Palo Altans had the foresight and energy to save and protect our foothills and Baylands. Palo Altans did the legwork that made it possible to form a new agency with the power to solve flooding problems on San Francisquito Creek. Palo Altans had the vision to test a local shuttle system that became a reality.

We're a great community full of wonderful people and we value public participation.

No, we more than value it-public participation is the fabric of our lives.

Our wealth of energy, interest and commitment means that our city government must be inclusive. Broad-based participation is so highly valued that sometimes, as a result, things move slowly.

Technology has increased public participation in government. My e-mail communications have gone from zero to upwards of 50 per day in the last six years.

Putting information on the Web is not only better, but also cheaper than answering questions by phone or mail. The City is doing a good job responding to the challenge and is getting better all the time. People who want everything now will never be satisfied, but there is a huge amount of information that is available on the City's Web site, and more is available each day.

The public can now see City agendas, minutes, staff reports, draft plans, ordinances, and schedules on the Web. This information has always been available at the Library, but it required a trip and investment of time to be able to see it. Now anyone with access to the Internet can see it anytime that is convenient.

I think it is great that citizens are getting and sharing information and processing it themselves, but it has challenged the way we, the decision-makers, work with the

community. The public should be involved, thoughtful, and knowledgeable -but Council still needs to make decisions, and use Staff appropriately to assist them.

Our challenge when working with Staff is to respect their professional expertise, yet be able to ask the tough questions to make sure that they have considered all the issues. The public can suggest an alternative, point to a missed fact, or provide insight, but Council needs to rely upon Staff to evaluate that input in a larger context. We should be working as a team, solving problems.

Technology has increased the amount of information, and the number of people who have access to that information. But information and access do not necessarily lead to agreement. We are a community of diverse opinions and I can't think of one issue when there was public agreement on a single solution. Can you?

And that's where the City Council comes in. In the face of a multitude of facts, differences of opinion, and perhaps differences in values, it is up to the Council to make a decision, in the best interest of the whole community.

Public input is vital to the process. But, we need to know when we have enough information-the perfect decision, based on complete information, is always elusive, if not unattainable. As my esteemed friend, and former mayor, Joe Simitian, says, "perfection is the enemy of progress."

We are a great community full of wonderful people, yet we're uneasy with our lives.

One of the downsides of having such a great community is that we worry that something will change and ruin it for us and our children.

The State of California is in a high-growth mode, and even though the Bay Area is not expected to absorb the largest increase in statewide population, it will inevitably grow. We have faced increasing problems pushing at us from the "outside" for the last half century.

We have attracted the attention of others who want to live and work here. As we've welcomed new residents, we've lost residents of moderate income. Our growing residential population has put pressure on our schools, increased traffic and worsened the shortage of affordable housing.

It's hard for us to face these realities; and harder still to imagine our population growing any more. On the one hand, we see a need to provide housing for our teachers and public safety workers. On the other, we're struggling to find a place for it.

There are some who feel more housing is unthinkable. But others are trying to come to grips with the need to provide housing that will help meet our fair share of regional population growth. We're trying to find ways to provide housing that is affordable to both low- and middle-income families. We want to be able to house those on whom we rely to provide our personal and business services.

Many Palo Altans have enjoyed the opportunity to live and work in town and we're struggling to understand that it just may help solve our traffic problems to create housing to allow more of our workforce to live and work with us.

We spend endless hours discussing traffic. Yet we continue to worry about it and are not succeeding in changing the way we use our cars. In fact, we are driving more than ever. Sometimes we are just being lazy, and sometimes we choose to drive to avoid real or perceived dangers. Fewer children are walking or biking to school.

Conceptually, we're all in favor of safer streets. But, when we try to implement something specific, we hear complaints. "Traffic calming is fine, but please don't make me slow down;" or "Eliminating cut-through traffic is good, but don't make me go out of my way;" or " Bike lanes are fine, but I want to be able to park in that spot."

We want to be able to do business with local businesses and are saddened by their continued decline. Yet, we've shifted our own behavior and now regularly travel to neighboring communities to make purchases at large chain stores or turn to the Internet to order products we might otherwise purchase locally.

We fail to connect our collective behaviors with these problems that plague us. Perhaps Pogo was right-"We have met the enemy and he is us."

We're a great community filled with wonderful people but our sales tax-base and funding from the State and Federal governments is on the decline.

We are being forced to downsize. And that's a tall order! We're trying to reduce expenditures at a time when public demand for services has never been greater. We're revisiting long-settled decisions about the relative importance of each service and coming face-to-face with our personal and community priorities.

For the last decade we've been striving to catch up to fill the gap in the repair and maintenance of our streets, parks, and storm drains. We're tackling the needs of a steadily increasing youth population. We're concerned about the state of our open space parks, our libraries, Art Center, Children's Museum and other community facilities that are so important to us.

As if that weren't enough to do, we haven't been looking ahead to prepare for future needs, like the significant jump in our senior population that is expected to more than double within the next ten years.

Sadly, we've seen a clash of priorities. Our community could choose to downsize programs and services that don't have a vocal or organized base OR we could choose to right-size our dreams and make sure that we maintain the rich mix that has marked our community's history.

We're a great community filled with wonderful people, yet we're unsure about our city government.

Against a national backdrop of growing unease with institutions and government in general, our own city government is suffering from attack, suspicion, distrust and slow paralysis. It is almost as if we fear to do anything that would move us beyond the status quo.

Extensive media coverage scrutinizes our every move and gives the impression that if only we were an effective government we could do it all and do it perfectly.

We seem to be losing sight of the fact that city government belongs to and is created by us. Perhaps because we take such pains to make sure everyone can participate, our process is mired in details, resulting in indecision and an inability to move forward.

Government is never perfect-but then we're all human and occasionally even we have to admit to our foibles!

The business of politics is a pretty rough sport. The press and the public certainly have not been treating this Council with kid gloves. But, no one really cares whether we make an unpleasant face, as long as we do our work. The public cares most that our process is fair and open, and that it allows us to make good, timely decisions.

There are two things this Council must do to help lift our community out of its suspicion, fear and distrust of government.

First, the Council must set expectations about how it interacts with City Staff to make sure that Staff is allowed to work independently and that no one council member, or group of council members, has "special" access to Staff or influence upon the work of Staff.

Second, the Council must set expectations about how it interacts with the public so that no one individual or group has "special" access or influence over the outcome of any decision.

We're a great community filled with wonderful people, yet we're suspicious of one another.

Some people are concerned that business interests control our government, and that our decision-making process disadvantages residents. Oddly, both development and business communities feel that they too are being disadvantaged. And some residents have told me that they fear other residents have undue influence on the Council.

Neighborhood associations have banded together to create large and small e-mail communication networks that have changed the lobbying landscape significantly from the days -but six years ago- when a neighborhood typically fought its battles in solo mode. The business community, in an attempt to level the playing field, is trying to find an effective way to respond. And residents, who may not agree with positions advocated by neighborhood associations or neighborhood spokespersons, are finding it harder to be heard.

Community leaders frequently have private meetings with Council members to make sure that their views and concerns are understood, yet feel uncomfortable when Council members meet with developers and business leaders. Shouldn't the "fair and open" rule allow private meetings with all parties?

These private meetings are always okay when you are involved-but seem suspicious when others are involved and you're not. There is no way to tell who has been talking to whom-a situation that breeds suspicion, fear and distrust.

We should explore a public process that discourages private sharing of information and favors equal access to all information and points of view. If Council members, by their choice to meet privately with various stakeholders, are inadvertently adding to community suspicion, fear and distrust, I believe we should modify our rules of engagement.

I have personally chosen to avoid private contacts about specific projects, though I have continued to engage community members in general conversation. I'm finding it easier to come to Council meetings without preconceived conclusions or promised outcomes. I'm better able to openly evaluate information provided in public by Staff and citizens, and make my decision accordingly.

We're a great community filled with wonderful people, and term limits have changed the way we're governed.

This is the sixth year that I've been a member of the Council. I've served with three different sets of colleagues and five mayors other than myself. The only colleague left from the original set of council members is Council member and former Mayor Vic Ojakian. Everyone else was either termed out or lost their bid for re-election

Each new group of council members needs to find a way to work together effectively-and that task is getting harder. With each change in council membership, there has been less understanding and agreement about the role and duties of the City Council. Over time, there has been less clarity about the importance of the City Council as a body representing broad community interests, as opposed to individual or narrow agendas.

Term limits have meant that more people are being elected without the background and shared experience once typical of the Council. New people and fresh ideas are beneficial, but the lack of a common background and understanding of a standard set of operating rules has made it more difficult for this Council to get on with its business.

In spite of these difficulties, the public still expects Council members to be committed to working as a group; to hear various points of view; consider possible solutions; and vote. Once decided, the majority position prevails - even if it's not one's personal favorite. We each are elected to serve as a member of a governing entity-the City Council. Individually we have no power and no vested authority other than our one vote. It is our nine votes that count as one action. The public expects us to vote and move on. Otherwise, we run the risk of becoming a "do-nothing council."

We're a great community filled with wonderful people but we're not looking to the future.

Too often, we prefer to conduct our city's business as though we are separate and apart from our neighboring cities. But there is so much going on around us! I'm concerned that if we don't engage in the larger political arena, we'll lose control of Palo Alto's future.

What would Palo Alto be like if Moffett Field were converted to a general aviation airport with capacity for cargo planes? That's the current vision supporting increased passenger service at our three major regional airports.

What would Palo Alto be like if an expressway connecting the Dumbarton Bridge to Hwy 101 were built across our Baylands or over the golf course or playing fields on Geng Road? That's a possible scenario under study by San Mateo and Santa Clara counties.

What would Palo Alto be like if inter-agency bickering destroyed the San Francisquito Creek Joint Powers Authority and the Army Corps of Engineers withdrew its offer of money and technical assistance to provide flood control? That's a possible scenario if we ignore the concerns and needs of other communities.

What would Palo Alto be like if the State took away significant sources of funding-millions of dollars-because we were unable to provide our share of housing? That's a realistic scenario. We can expect increasing financial pressure to force us to help balance our historic abundance of jobs.

I'm concerned that we've become so process-bound-so involved in micro-managing our government-we don't have time, money or energy to participate meaningfully in these decisions. And if we don't participate, we won't be in control of our destiny.

We're a great community full of wonderful people and we can change!

We're moving away from community values toward protecting our own individual interests and the interests of our families. We fear losing what we have or of not getting all we deserve.

There is always a dynamic tension between community values and personal values, but I believe we've swung too far toward protecting personal interests. We're doing more talking about what we each want as individuals, and we're not listening to what others need.

We seem to just want what we want. If we have the political clout, we're willing to override the interests of others.

If you have any doubt that community gardens are less important than libraries, go visit the garden next to the Main Library. It's gloriously beautiful now-the roses and sweet peas are in bloom. There is no doubt in my mind that the gardens are an important community asset.

If you have any doubt that families with dogs need to have places to play, go visit the Mitchell Park dog run. There is a group of happy and committed dog owners who are an important part of the community fabric.

If you have any doubt that the arts are worth funding, go visit the California Avenue business district-have lunch or dinner, or sip a latte and enjoy the art. These businesses are enriched by Palo Alto's willingness to support the arts.

If you have any doubt that a thriving business community adds to our vibrancy, visit Downtown on a weekend night, and feel the energy.

If you think economic growth is for the other guy, ask your neighbors if they are hoping to be able to keep their jobs or be able to launch an exciting new business venture for the future.

We can recapture the community spirit that has marked previous decades.

We can have it all - as long as we're willing to listen to others; learn compromise, teamwork and compassion; and work as a community, not a lonely collection of individuals. Perfection must not be our goal. Our goal must be to include the needs of every member of our community.

We can build housing to accommodate new residents. We can have a vibrant economy that will help pay for our many services and programs. We can make our streets safer. We can provide services for all sectors of our community. We can give a helping hand to those most in need, so that their lives will be good lives, too.

By any standard, there is important work for this Council to do. Cities need robust political institutions. The City Council is the one institution designed to serve as the collective voice of residents and the community at large.

Let's listen to what each of us has to say. Let's agree to pay attention to the expert advice provided by City Staff. Let's honor our neighbors. Let's open our hearts to the needs of others. Let's be a great community and warmly welcome wonderful people to be a part of our success!