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Celebrating local innovation and resilience

By Emily Beach

I'll never forget the day the sky turned orange over Burlingame Avenue. The air was full of ash from raging fires, and I needed bike lights to ride home safely at noon. I snapped a photo which has come to symbolize my year as mayor. While days were dark, uncharted, and difficult — in the background remained a glowing, irrepressible light.



This year, local governments in San Mateo County demonstrated we can solve problems. Our county's leadership team spearheaded an outstanding public health response and addressed economic fallout proactively and collaboratively. Cities also proved to be inspiring laboratories for innovation, and we've become a more resilient community.

Throughout our region, local roads made way made way for parklets and slow streets programs. Here in Burlingame, Vice Mayor Ann O'Brien and Councilman Ricardo Ortiz worked tirelessly on Burlingame's Economic Development Subcommittee to understand the needs of struggling businesses. We made a bold decision to close Burlingame Avenue and Broadway to cars, an unimaginable experiment a year ago. In addition to providing space for social distancing and commerce, we learned that creating pedestrian promenades — prioritizing people over automobiles — enhanced safety, vibrancy and community.

Councilmembers Donna Colson and Michael Brownrigg helped develop a local business support program that included direct financial aid, plus gift cards to help struggling residents shop locally. Ultimately, our City Council allocated more than \$1 million split evenly between local business and individual support. This included \$100,000 for a rental assistance fund through Samaritan House for Burlingame residents.

Government can't solve every challenge, and our community rose to the occasion. The Burlingame Neighborhood Network mobilized volunteers to deliver meals and groceries, and check on isolated neighbors. Meals for Mills raised money to purchase 4,000 meals from Burlingame restaurants for our hospital's frontline workers. CALL Primrose food pantry received generous donations to help fund 260% more Burlingame clients. The San Mateo County Labor Council mobilized hundreds of volunteers who served groceries to 52,000 in UA Local 467's parking lot. On Grab-and-Go mornings, it's sobering to see miles of cars lined up at dawn.

COVID-19 also inspired the creation of The Burlingame Collaborative. Sixty leaders representing businesses, health care, seniors, K-12 schools, service clubs, 12 different faith organizations, labor, parent groups, nonprofits and local government strengthened relationships and mobilized resources. These partnerships yielded results: the Burlingame Rotary Club purchased 2,000 books from our Library Foundation, who partnered with the Burlingame Elementary School District to create home libraries for deserving students. CALL Primrose and faith leaders removed roadblocks to free groceries. Other Collaborative volunteers created a COVID-19 resource guide which the city published to all residents, and helped lead 11% new Burlingame clients to CALL Primrose. Another committee launched SupportBurlingame.com, a free virtual marketplace for local businesses to promote and sell gift cards. Supporters may also donate gift cards to charity and Collaborative volunteers will deliver them to Samaritan House. Our community inspires me.

Throughout the chaos, our dedicated city staff led by City Manager Lisa Goldman continued to provide quality services. Recreation leaders partnered with the Peninsula Health Care District to host virtual Memory Cafés for isolated residents suffering from memory loss. More affordable housing entered the construction pipeline. Library staff pioneered curbside pick-ups, and our equity team hosted virtual anti-bias and racial justice programming during Burlingame Stands United Against Hate Week. I'm particularly proud of the Burlingame Police Department's response during the Black Lives Matter movement: improving our use-of-force policies, keeping us safe and listening to real concerns. This Monday, our chief will update the community about his department's progress to combat racial bias, and revamp our response to behavioral health and homelessness calls.

I also salute our City Council for continuing to move other important policies and projects forward: Burlingame's Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan, a \$15 accelerated minimum wage, electric building reach codes — arguably among the strongest in the region, laws governing short-term rentals, the El Camino Real Roadway Renewal Project, and a future town square.

In 2020, so many people suffered extreme hardship, loss, economic devastation and isolation. Recently, my friend's reflection on a recent Zoom meeting failure and recovery epitomized how our community rose to the challenges: "it was messy, beautiful, creative and responsive." Thankfully, the sky isn't orange anymore and brighter days are within sight. Even amidst this dangerous COVID-19 holiday surge, we know how to stay safe (no social gatherings!) and vaccines offer meaningful hope. On the journey ahead, I'm also hoping we build on 2020's momentum and continue to volunteer, leverage technology to strengthen civic engagement, house the homeless with dignity, rededicate ourselves to equity and racial justice, honor low-wage service workers and keep giving our cars a rest in 2021. Most importantly, I hope our spirit of collaboration, tenacity, and compassion becomes the new normal.



Emily Beach is the Mayor of Burlingame.