

## KOU Kick Off speech

Hello Everyone, please indulge me for a few minutes to thank Janet Dafoe and Ron Davis for hosting my campaign launch event at their beautiful home. Thank you Janet and Ron. Also, to Tom, Karen and Doria, thank you, for sharing our experiences together and what you know of me. I am greatly honored and humbled by all you said. To my campaign team and supporters. Thank you for standing by me and supporting me. Thank you for coming today.

My name is Lydia Kou. Many of you know me already, I see familiar faces. If we are meeting for the first time, I want to tell you with a little about me.

I am a resident of Palo Alto, now into my eighteenth year. My husband John and I live in the Barron Park neighborhood. We have two grown daughters who attended the Palo Alto school system and both are self-reliant, one living in San Francisco and the other living in Southern California. Later this year, we will become a multi-generational household again -my Mum will be moving in with us; meanwhile, we live with our dog, Socrates.

And... I am running for the Palo Alto City Council.

The 2014 council hit the brakes on pace of development in Palo Alto, and began introducing sensible reforms, like limits on the rate of office growth, and protection for community-serving retail. But even these measures were hard fought and the council divided over them. The pressures we faced before 2014 remain, they are not gone. That's why the next council is so important.

On that next Council, We are losing to term limits... Mayor Pat Burt [point] and former Vice Mayor Greg Schmid [point]. Their experience and analysis of the issues will be sorely missed.

But that is how things work in a democracy. So the next council must pick up and carry on the work where the previous one left off. And we have much work left to do. I am running for this office in order to help do that work.

What I am going to focus on here are the big themes. Why? Because I need you to talk to your friends and neighbors and everyone you meet...about this.

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## **On City Hall and the Community**

I want us to have confidence in our city government. Before 2014, we hit a low point, with controversy over the 27 University project, the Arrillaga 7.7 acre debacle, and the critical Grand Jury report. Things have improved under the current council. But I still hear people saying there's no point in getting involved, that City Hall is going to do what it wants anyways. I hate hearing that. Because this can only happen if people perceive a gap between City Hall's values and the community's values.

I want our government to work in the most efficient and effective manner possible. The most challenging area is land use, because of all the regional and economic pressures, and in our community, the tension between growth rate and quality of life.

City Hall tries to apply generic... urban planning... concepts onto Palo Alto, which may not fit our community. Maybe some of these concepts should be applied to a region instead, not a city as small as Palo Alto, one with its own unique values. As residents, we want to be heard, without having to form a posse of neighbors to go lobby at so, so many city council meetings. Too many projects get appealed. Why? Because too often that has been the only way for thoughtful, concerned citizens to have their voices heard and concerns addressed.

The role of Council should not be to fix bad projects, but to enforce a process that produces good projects. We need City Hall to make policy and decisions that automatically align to the majority of residents, despite all the interest groups and regional advocacy groups.

The current council has made real progress. I want to shout out to the current Architectural Review Board, which in my view has upped their game significantly in the last year. But we need to keep going.

We can -

- Collaborate more with the residential neighborhood associations and hear their suggestions and guidance.

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- Establish a resident Transportation Advisory committee to contribute from the neighborhood level. Put in place measurements and evaluations to collect data and to ensure implementation of the concepts are effective. Ensure the committee has representatives equally from across town, as each neighborhood experiences different impacts.

## On Growth

In the past decade, Palo Alto City Council has approved large office and research & development spaces which has brought many jobs, but, it also brought traffic congestion and unhealthy road conditions, parking encroaching into the neighborhoods, pressure on our housing , overcrowding in our schools, loss of our tree canopy and the loss of many of our retail business. We have in place an interim office space building annual limit, but it is due to expire soon. We need that new Council majority to extend the development of the office space annual limit put in place in 2014 for a longer period and also to expand the coverage area to be citywide. Yes, including Stanford Research Park. Stanford actually has a higher job to housing imbalance than Palo Alto has, approximately 16% higher than Palo Alto<sup>1</sup>, which makes our problems only worse.

With a long-term annual limit on office development, the City can better focus on solutions, such as creating a baseline for collection of road capacity and factual traffic and parking analysis, then and only then, can any traffic management programs be evaluated, implemented and managed before they become neighborhood crises.

New transportation technology and innovation have great potential to help relieve some of our growth headaches. But fundamentally, our planning must not rely on unproven assumptions about future lifestyle and transportation innovations. We need to see these things actually work, here in Palo Alto, before we change our land-use policies around them.

This is another reason this election is so important. Many of our current woes – traffic, parking, and yes housing – stem from previous councils who went big on

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<sup>1</sup> Palo Alto 2.8:1, Stanford 3.23:1

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office growth in the not too distant past. And where are the people from those previous councils now? You can find many of their names on the endorsement lists of my opponents! And that includes former planning and transportation officials, some who now work in the Development industry. Take a look.

### **Housing**

Folks, a large part of my professional career has been in residential real estate. If there is anything I understand in Palo Alto, it's Housing.

In fact, I actually started right here in Palo Alto, as a renter. Even back then in 1988, there was an affordability issue. So instead, I bought a condo in Mountain View, and then when my older daughter was ready for kindergarten, we moved to another condo in Los Altos so that she could get into a better school system. Wanting to get our daughters in Palo Alto schools, we built up enough equity and savings to move into an 850 square foot fixer-upper surrounded by ivy. I have at that point achieved... my American Dream. We did later move up to our current home, furthering my American Dream. It was a step by step process, building equity and saving and sacrificing for longer term plans. I think many of you have experienced that too. Because this is the true soul of Palo Alto. People who wanted to put down long-term roots in this community, enough to really put their heart into it.

With the enormous growth in the Bay Area, obviously a lot of other people want this same dream too, for the same reasons I and so many others did. But as we work to accommodate this, we need to be careful. We can't allow housing to grow faster than our schools, infrastructure, traffic and what our community can accommodate. If we do, we could overload the very things that brought so many of us here in the first place.

I currently serve on the Citizens' Advisory Committee for the Comprehensive Plan update. I can tell you that we see a spectrum of opinions on this. There are groups and people who argue for massive stack-and-pack housing growth by citing only the good things that will happen. Certain advocates argue that accessory dwelling units will be occupied by low income people such as caretakers, grandparents, etc. Whereas, we all know it is more likely to be HENRYs

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(High Earning Not Rich Yet folks). And what we fear is that they will become dormitories, Airbnb and/or short term rentals. So we need to approach this thoughtfully.

There are groups who argue that we don't need to worry about traffic because we can have housing for people who don't drive cars. They use phrases like "car light" "car-free" housing. But most evidence...is that only a small fraction will not own cars. We can and should design new housing within walking or cycling distance of Palo Alto jobs, but we should not assume we will eliminate cars any time soon.

The big concern for all of us, of course, is affordability. I am a residential realtor. It is my business to know housing in Palo Alto. In my professional judgment, it is extremely unlikely that any practical amount of new housing construction in Palo Alto will actually reduce prices; there simply is too much local, national and international demand.

This is truly unfortunate, but it is the reality.

And while smaller units will indeed be slightly less expensive, they will still be beyond the reach of even middle-income workers. So a wise City Hall must design housing policies in light of these realities, not around wishful thinking for easy solutions to affordability.

This is not a call for no new housing; rather it is a call for pragmatism, focus, and a long-term view. Housing growth should be moderate, measured, and monitored, to ensure reliable and sustainable infrastructure, school capacity and other city services. We should not exceed the current Housing Element or ABAG requirements, as some are advocating.

Also let's be reminded, Stanford is expanding their housing stock for their students and faculty; at Escondido Village by 2,000 homes and also in the Upper Mayfield area which was the former Facebook headquarters with 180 homes. That will free up some of the housing stock in Palo Alto.

As our population grows, we need to protect and further expand our parks and open spaces. We are fortunate to have former councilors, such as Emily Renzel

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and Enid Pearson, who fought for open space to protect our foothills and baylands which allowed for wildlife to flourish and for us to enjoy. Our parks are disbursed in many neighborhoods, but that needs to keep up with the growth, as well as community centers in which we are in a shortage of. We are also fortunate to have Councilmember Karen Holman who continues to fight to preserve our trees, parks, open space, retail businesses and historic buildings.

I will go out on a limb here and say this: The Fry's site lease expires in three years. Nobody knows what will happen to that space once that happens, but many people have ideas, mostly of the urban kind. Here's my dream: the City should buy a larger part of the land near the creek and make it into a new park with a community center, the rest can be developed for housing by modeling after the SOFA plan that is the plan used to develop the former Palo Alto Medical Foundation site in Professorville. We're already behind the Comprehensive Plan on park space, and that parcel could help. Yes it would be expensive, but unless we start thinking about it now, it will never happen.

### Traffic

We can address traffic congestion with technology, good planning, and wise transportation investments, even as we simultaneously reduce dependency on automobiles. Yet we must recognize that it is unrealistic to expect most residents to suddenly stop driving vehicles. Our policies must be practical, strategic, and based on providing incentives and alternatives rather than simply punishing vehicle users.

For many of us, scheduling our trips around traffic hours is a minor inconvenience, but for some they are more significant. I have heard from seniors that they have stopped going altogether to morning exercise classes, even physical therapy, because of the strain of the trip. Other seniors say they have largely stopped going to lunch and activities at Avenidas senior center because of traffic. This is a problem!

We should continue opposing the VTA's plan to take away El Camino Real lanes. There's no evidence it will increase bus ridership, and even VTA acknowledges it

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will divert car traffic elsewhere, which means onto residential streets. This is not a good plan for Palo Alto.

Improving Caltrain capacity with grade separation is the right focus for transportation.

We must find a way to fund Transportation Demand Management (TDM). But this should come from the businesses whose commuting workers will use it, not from residents' taxes. Transporting workers to their jobs is an operating cost of business.

Retail is another part of community. I spoke about the loss of retail community serving businesses. I support extending the current ordinance to protect ground floor retail and also in preserving small offices for small proprietors that enhances and benefits the community. We've already lost icons in our community, my very favorite; Mr. Cho's which used to be on California serving dim sum, now relocated to Los Altos. Then, there is University Art which was in Downtown and many residents frequented, but now, probably expanding their carbon footprint to go to Redwood City to make purchases at their favorite art store and, also contributing to another city's sales tax revenue. Village Stationers on California Avenue is gone too. We lost Shady Lane and the sales tax revenue to Menlo Park because the property owners want to convert the space to office space which provides for higher rent prices and in turn, causes retail space rents to increase too.

### **Ohhh...Code Enforcement**

One of my personal nits is code enforcement. As growth comes along, there must be code enforcement all across the spectrum. There is no way to come to a compromise or solution when the stakeholders have no confidence that what they have been promised will be delivered. The rules needs to be enforced whether this pertains to residential parking permit program or transportation management programs or traffic laws or illegal conversions of retail space to office or protected neighborhood trees. If we want to make our roads safer, then we need to actually start giving out some tickets for the illegal left turns and how

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about those rolling California stops at Stop signs for all users! Rolling was a generous word, often times road users don't even stop!

However, we have 3 code enforcement officers and one is in the managerial position. We are underinvested in this department. If we don't enforce our codes, then we don't have codes.

### **Financials**

While the code enforcement department appears to be underinvested in, there are increases of staffing in the upper management level. I have to ask the question why was a new upper level management position necessary when there are departments, such as, code enforcement that could use more staffing.

Also, in the coming years, there are 9 infrastructure projects identified, with one being the Public Safety Building estimated to cost \$57 million. Remembering the delays in completing the Mitchell Park Library and Community Center, I would want to be kept informed and updated often as to the progress and to be proactive in foreseeing problems and troubleshooting early on.

I want to see each and every one of those 9 infrastructure project built well and with quality, especially the public safety building, the 2 fire stations and the very much needed California Avenue and Downtown parking garages without excessive change order and lawsuits.

### **Summary**

I am running because I am committed to our community, which probably Councilmember Holman and Doria have already convinced you of and if not, Council member Tom DuBois will surely in the next few minutes. The Palo Alto Weekly called me "the organizer" and I have those qualities and, those of you who know me... know... that I take action and I am tenacious.

My history and my continued desire has been to ensure residents are heard and for the City to make greater use of the many expertise the residents can provide. I will need and expect your help and expertise – if elected.

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Visit my campaign website, [www.LydiaKou.com](http://www.LydiaKou.com), I have compiled a list of my community volunteer involvements through the years and my dedication to public service.

My goals on City Council will be:

To foster confidence and trust in City Hall by working to realign City Hall's vision with that of the residents and to encourage and engage citizen involvement. I would want to continue with keeping in touch at the neighborhood level and ask you to keep me informed and have me participate.

I believe in moderate growth by thoroughly assessing the immediate and future impacts of each development to its immediate neighborhood, to the surrounding neighborhoods and to Palo Alto as a whole. But, let's not stop there: we also have to assess and take into consideration what our neighboring cities are doing and what their impacts will be to our city. While there is little control that we can exert onto other cities, we can control the policies we have in our own city.

By the way... in the last election there were one or two "pivoters" – that is, candidates who ran as residentialists, even fooling some of the newspapers, and then pivoted the instant they took their oath of office. You all know me well enough to know that isn't me. But you're going to hear the word "moderate" a lot this Fall. So watch out!

One test: the fifty-foot height limit. I will work to retain the fifty-foot height limit. People who want to see giant buildings... can visit Redwood City.

I believe we have an inherent right to expect to have quiet enjoyment in our homes and in the community we have decided to raise our children and if we choose, to grow old in. Therefore, preserving the essential character of our residential neighborhoods and keeping our quality of life is so very important.

I believe in looking at a higher level and bigger picture, long term and strategically rather than expensive short term views and goals. At each stage in life, there is a deeper appreciation of what the previous generation has given back and it is not to be disparaged, it should instead be appreciated, respected and something to learn from.

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I sincerely appreciate any and all efforts you put in to supporting me. All you do makes a difference to me, and for me and I hope you will provide me the opportunity to make a difference. Take a lawn sign. Donate. Above all, vote and Vote for me and tell everyone you know to vote for me.

The stakes are high, but the prize of keeping our beautiful community is worth it.

Thank you all so much for coming to listen and support me today, and onward to November!