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Editorial: Keller, Kou, Kniss and Fine for Palo Alto City Council

by Palo Alto Weekly editorial board

Two years ago, during the last City Council campaign in Palo Alto, a chorus of longtime community leaders who had dominated city politics for many years made dire warnings about electing the three leading "outsider," so-called "slow growth" candidates.

Those candidates -- Tom DuBois, Eric Filseth and Lydia Kou -- along with incumbent Karen Holman, were channeling residents' concerns over excessive office development, parking and traffic congestion and the failure of the council to protect the quality of life in Palo Alto.

Their campaigns challenged the status quo by giving voice to more diverse elements of Palo Alto, especially those who felt city policy was being overly influenced by a political establishment rooted in the north part of the city and too sympathetic to development interests.

At the time, some of that political establishment labeled these candidates as opposed to *any* new development, including housing, and a whisper campaign suggested they were libertarians or Tea Party members masquerading as residentialists. In short, electing these folks would be bad for Palo Alto.

When the balloting was over, DuBois, Filseth and Holman were elected, along with incumbent Greg Scharff and newcomer Cory Wolbach, who beat Kou by just 135 votes.

The newly constituted council went on to elect Holman mayor, and for the first time in more than four decades, the city had a council philosophically split roughly down the middle.

So how has it turned out? Have DuBois and Filseth turned out to be the obstructionist no-growthers the political establishment warned of during the 2014 campaign?

Hardly. They have served the community well over the last two years and have brought healthy, intelligent and substantive debate to council meetings. Their presence has forced the entire council to look for common ground, and with a few exceptions, the political split on the council has improved outcomes and eased, not deepened, community angst. When all segments of the community believe their views are represented by at least someone on the council, confidence in the process grows in spite of sincerely held differences.

Without the new political alignment brought about by the 2014 election it is almost certain that the city would still be granting special zoning in exchange for so-called community "benefits" (the infamous "planned community" projects), would have no cap on office development, may not have stuck with a nascent downtown residential-parking program and would have approved a commercial office building at the corner of Page Mill Road and El Camino Real, among other places.

Unfortunately, in this year's City Council campaign emotions and lingering hard feelings from two years ago have led to an almost identical dynamic, with two groups of four candidates once again painting the race as a clear choice about the future of the city and once again distorting positions of the other side.

While everyone avoids the term "slate," each side calls the other a slate and urges voters to support their group of candidates. It's déjà vu.

Both of these "sides" have engaged in regrettable campaign tactics -- a turn-off to those voters more interested in electing the best qualified candidates who will neither be tools for development interests nor afraid of change and innovation.

The Chamber of Commerce embarrassed itself and did the community a disservice when it sent a shrill email to its members supporting the set of four candidates (incumbent Liz Kniss, Greg Tanaka, Adrian Fine and Don McDougall) it found most sympathetic to business interests and containing blatant inaccuracies and mischaracterizations, especially of the views of Mayor Pat Burt. The chamber, which used to temper its advocacy on behalf of businesses out of a desire to build bridges to the broader community, is responsible for triggering acrimony that most in the community don't want to see in their local political contests.

Then Arthur Keller and Kou crossed the line with a Facebook video ad warning incorrectly that Fine was advocating high-rise office and condo development.

And finally there are questions surrounding the enormous donations made by five Palo Alto couples in the last two weeks to the Keller and Kou campaigns and to the Palo Altans for Sensible Zoning PAC (which supports Keller, Kou, Stewart Carl and Greer Stone). These donations, totaling more than \$160,000, are unprecedented in Palo Alto politics and are a huge departure from the tradition of grassroots fundraising in which \$1,000 has been considered a large donation.

Had a developer, architect or large property owner made campaign contributions of this size, voters would have legitimately questioned the independence of the candidate who accepted them.

And while the donations are perfectly legal and the five donor families insist that their only interest is in making sure that Keller and Kou are able to wage effective campaigns comparable to the opposing group, the donations have triggered distracting and unsupported conspiracy theories about the donors' ties to Castilleja School and allegations that they are trying to buy the election for unknown reasons.

The indignant reaction of a handful of former mayors, who each support the opposing candidates, was equally disappointing for its sweeping assertions and innuendo. There is nothing to suggest anything other than political inexperience and poor judgment led to these donations.

In deciding whom to recommend in this year's race we find ourselves in a dilemma similar to two years ago -- how to balance candidate knowledge and experience, views on issues, ability to work with others and ability to effectively articulate their positions and philosophy. We also are mindful of the political orientations of the incumbents who are leaving the council -- Burt, Greg Schmid and Marc Berman and the effect on the balance on the council.

Four years ago three incumbents were seeking re-election (Holman, Greg Scharff and Nancy Shepherd) and this year only one, Kniss, is running. None of the challengers in 2014 had served on city commissions. This year we have two current (Tanaka and Fine) and one past (Keller) planning commissioners, but the other candidates have little or no public record on which they can be judged.

Stone has been on the Human Relations Commission for three years and is currently chairperson. McDougall is vice chair of the Library Advisory Commission.

Kou, along with Keller and McDougall, is on the Comprehensive Plan Citizens Advisory Committee (Keller is co-chairing the group) and Carl is the founder of Sky Posse, the group that is advocating for changes to the new airplane routing system. Len Ely and John Fredrich are running independently and have not served on any city commissions or advisory committees. Danielle Martell declined to be interviewed.

The Weekly published extensive profiles of each candidate on Oct. 14 and has posted videos of our endorsement interviews held the week of Oct. 3. We urge voters to read and watch this coverage to get their own sense for the capabilities and styles of the candidates.

For voters who wish to make strictly philosophical voting decisions, the choices are clear. If you are most concerned with controlling future commercial development and making sure that traffic congestion and parking needs are addressed prior to, not after, development is approved, then your candidates are Arthur Keller, Lydia Kou, Stewart Carl and Greer Stone. To varying degrees, these four all support low annual limits on new commercial development and oppose relaxing parking requirements for developments without stronger evidence that alternative transportation methods will be successful in our suburban community. They generally reject the idea that Palo Alto's housing affordability problems can be successfully addressed by building lots of dense, market-rate housing for all income levels, and instead advocate a more focused strategy of subsidized housing for service workers, seniors and low-income residents.

Voters who believe the city needs to move aggressively and creatively to encourage development of higher density housing for all types of income levels, including young families and highly paid tech workers wanting to live in Palo Alto, your candidates are Adrian Fine, Don McDougall and Greg Tanaka. These three, along with Kniss, are more welcoming to new development proposals of all kinds and want to see the city be more experimental, innovative and less restrictive in building new housing, especially with regard to height and parking.

Ely is the candidate most supportive of new commercial office development, but mostly emphasizes his belief that city government needs to be more efficient, learn quickly from its mistakes and focus on getting stuff done rather than talking problems to death.

As we recommended two years ago, we urge voters to consider not simply picking one group of candidates or the other, but to consider which four candidates will best complement the five holdover councilmembers and successfully work together to shape the future of the community.

In terms of knowledge and experience, Kniss and Keller top the list. While Kniss sometimes frustrates us for lapses in homework on the issues and over-reliance on her extensive personal network of friends for input, she knows this community better than any other candidate and is a practical politician who is good at reading and following the political winds. She has moved toward the middle with the rising community concerns over development and traffic and looks for ways of bridging differences and building consensus.

Keller is a lover of data who understands planning issues and trade-offs more than any other candidate. He can frustrate and irritate both his political allies and opponents because of his obsessive analyses and strong opinions, but he also has the most to offer after serving for eight years on the planning commission. To succeed on the council he will need to adjust his approach and pick his battles carefully, but he will be invaluable as the new council reviews, approves and implements the new comprehensive plan.

The best candidates for the other two slots, in our opinion, are Kou and Fine.

Kou has grown tremendously in her knowledge and understanding of the community and issues since the 2014 election campaign. She has a strong following among neighborhood activists, has learned a lot from serving on the Comprehensive Plan Citizens Advisory Committee and would add important gender and ethnic diversity to a council that needs more of each.

Fine is young, relatively inexperienced and untested, but is the most passionate and enthusiastic of the candidates about keeping Palo Alto a community welcoming of young families and open to new ideas and strategies for the city's future. His two short years on the planning commission have been bumpy and his opposition to the temporary development cap (which he now says he supports) conveys some naivete. But he is representative of a generation that will eventually assume the leadership mantle for the city.

While we expect to disagree with some of Fine's actions, he will bring a needed voice to the council that is rooted in a sincere desire to see the community he grew up in evolve in a way that preserves its character yet embraces change.

Among the remaining candidates, we believe Stone, Carl and McDougall each offer qualities and viewpoints that could help create a well-balanced council. They are all well-informed, have thoughtful positions and articulate them well, and we'd love to see them continue their activities and return in two years. Tanaka, with eight years experience on the planning commission, surprised us by being unable or unwilling to answer basic questions about planning issues, such as his position on whether and how commercial development should be controlled. While we respect and agree with his desire to reach out and seek consensus, his reluctance to articulate his own views and values was, in our opinion, disqualifying.

With the election of Keller, Kou, Kniss and Fine, the current split on the council will be preserved, but with a slightly stronger slow-growth majority due to the departure of Burt, who had become a swing vote on a council divided 4-4 on many planning and development issues.

The next few years will see the council adopt a new comprehensive plan and hire a new city manager, two of the most important and consequential actions of any council. We think a narrowly divided council, with a tilt toward continued restraint on development, is the best formula for meeting these challenges and moving the community forward.

The Weekly has created a [Storify page](#) for its coverage on the Palo Alto City Council election.

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