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Lydia Kou

'Slogans will not solve our challenges'

by Gennady Sheyner

Lydia Kou is always prepared for the next disaster, whether it's an earthquake or a new office building that she believes is threatening Palo Alto's quality of life.

A seasoned veteran of both the city's emergency-preparedness efforts and, more recently, its land-use battles, Kou is a familiar presence at City Hall and a popular leader in her neighborhood of Barron Park, where she has spent years organizing activities to bring the community together, including diversity events like Lunar New Year or the Indian Holi Festival.

Yet on the topic of land use, the real-estate agent is perhaps best known for what she wants to keep out of Palo Alto. She believes unchecked office development is a threat to the community and that new housing, while a laudable goal, should be pursued with extreme caution. In her view, the city's character is changing for the worse. When asked at a recent forum sponsored by Palo Alto Neighborhoods whether city life is worse now than it was in 2008, during the Great Recession, she said that in some ways it is. Traffic has gotten worse, many longtime retailers have left town and many seniors don't bother going to exercise classes anymore because it's too difficult to get there. And while some candidates and council members argue that the city should focus on the impacts of new developments (traffic, parking, etc.) rather than development itself, Kou rejects this view.

"Palo Alto is becoming, or transitioning into, an office park, and residents are fighting to be heard and to regain their quality of life," Kou said at the Sept. 29 forum. "It's not transportation or parking that's the focus, it's the over development. And moving forward, it's the tension between the growth rate and our quality of life."

The message is one that she has delivered consistently since 2013, when she helped lead a grassroots effort to overturn an approved housing development on Maybell Avenue -- a project that included 60 apartments for low-income seniors and 12 single-family homes. The following year, Kou ran for the City Council with the group's support and fell just 135 votes shy of getting elected. Now, she's trying again and her message is largely the same: Commercial development needs to be slowed and additional housing should be pursued only with the greatest of caution.

In this view, Kou has plenty of allies. The council's four slow-growth members -- Tom DuBois, Eric Filseth, Karen Holman and Greg Schmid -- are the honorary chairs of her campaign. The citizens group Palo Altans for Sensible Zoning supported her campaign in 2014 and is expected to do so again. And Stewart Carl, a College Terrace resident who is also seeking a council seat, told the Weekly that he decided to run because he strongly supports Kou and wants to help secure a slow-growth majority on the council after Nov. 8.

Over the past two years, Kou has sat through countless council meetings and served on the Citizens Advisory Committee to update the Comprehensive Plan, becoming well-versed in the city's housing issues and traffic-congestion measurements. She has emerged in this election season as a passionate watchdog bent on preserving the city's "quality of life."

In explaining her positions on housing, Kou speaks most concretely about the affordable kind, noting that her priority would be to create housing for service workers, teachers and others who cannot afford market-rate homes. She believes in retaining the city's affordable housing "in-lieu" fee that developers are allowed to pay to avoid setting aside units as below-market-rate housing in new developments, a fee that some have lobbied to

eliminate. For-sale below-market-rate units of this sort, she wrote in a questionnaire from the group Palo Alto Neighborhoods, can lead to "deferred maintenance" issues. Below-market-rate rental units, meanwhile, can be hard to manage if they're scattered throughout market-rate developments.

When the Comprehensive Plan committee discussed in August new mechanisms for monitoring and measuring the impacts for new commercial developments, to make sure they take care of the traffic and parking problems they create, Kou argued that the same mechanisms should be applied to housing developments, including those with below-market-rate units.

Kou is equally skeptical when she discusses the city's approach to transportation, particularly the notion that traffic could be curtailed through "transportation demand management" programs, in which transit passes, bike amenities, ride-share services and other programs are offered to workers to stop them from driving to work solo.

"Part of our traffic and parking problems are the result of the city approving projects based on assumptions that many of the employees would use transit," Kou wrote in the Palo Alto Neighborhoods questionnaire. "But these claims were simply 'aspirational' -- there was no enforcement mechanism and thus the landlord and occupant put little if any effort into promoting transit."

At recent candidate forums, Kou has criticized the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority, which has attempted to reduce services for Palo Alto over the years and failed to fund projects as it had previously promised. Unlike most city officials and candidates, she opposes Measure B, the VTA's ballot measure to raise the sales tax rate by 1/2 cent to pay for a host of transportation improvements (these include \$1.5 billion for the extension of BART to San Jose; \$700 million toward the grade separation of Caltrain in Palo Alto, Mountain View and Sunnyvale; and funding to improve highway interchanges, expressways and roads throughout the county). Palo Alto's policies, she said in the questionnaire, should be "based on an expectation of very low service levels from VTA (the definition of insanity is doing something over and over again and expecting a different result)."

Like many other candidates, she supports the city's recently imposed annual cap on new office development, though she argues that it doesn't go far enough. Today, the 50,000-square-foot cap applies to downtown, California Avenue, El Camino Real and is set to expire once the city adopts its updated Comprehensive Plan. She wants the cap to cover the entire city, including Stanford Research Park, and to continue after the Comprehensive Plan's adoption.

Until the city has a way to verify that proposed traffic-reduction policies actually work, office growth should be tightly controlled. She rejects as unproven concepts like "car-free," "car-light" and "smart growth" -- in which it's assumed that residents of higher-density buildings will take public transit or use bikes and not own cars. She also does not believe the city should allow taller-than-50-foot buildings, greater density or fewer parking spaces at buildings based on assumptions about changing lifestyles.

Every candidate, she said at a recent forum, supports things like "inclusiveness," "better transportation" and "quality of life." But slogans, she added, will not solve our challenges.

"We need a council with wisdom to involve our community in a thoughtful and deliberate way that embraces innovation but does not rely on unproven assumptions about future lifestyles and transportation until we see these things actually work in Palo Alto," Kou said. "Because we're all in this for the long term."

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