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Council candidate pool grows to 14 in Palo Alto

Lawyers, school volunteers join race for five seats on the City Council

by **Gennady Sheyner**
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Lawyers, real-state agents and education activists are dominating a crowded field of Palo Altans seeking seats on the City Council in November.

Fourteen people filed papers by Wednesday's deadline declaring their candidacy for the nine-member council, which will have five seats up for grabs in November.

These include candidates from previous council races: Planning and Transportation Commissioner Karen Holman, Realtor Dan Dykwel, businessman Timothy Gray and panhandler Victor Frost. They will be joined in the race first-time council candidates Chris Gaither, Leon Leong, Brian Steen, Gail Price, Mark Weiss, Gregory Scharff, Nancy Shepherd, Corey Levens and John Hackmann.

Of the three incumbents whose terms will expire this year, Councilman Larry Klein is the only one seeking reelection in November.

Though the candidates represent a broad spectrum of interests and experiences, the field is particularly heavy in education volunteers and lawyers opposed to the proposed business-license tax. Price had served on the Board of Education, while Nancy Shepherd has been one of the leading school advocates and served as president of the Palo Alto Council of PTAs.

Dykwel has also presided over the PTA council and has been a leading organizer of fundraisers that benefited schools and recreation activities. He said sitting on the council would present him with a "wonderful opportunity to see how the city functions" and said the local economy will be the top challenge that the council will have to face in the coming years.

Weiss, whose background is in promoting concerts and managing artists, said he is running on an "arts platform." Though he acknowledged that public art makes up only a fraction of the city's expenditures, he said he wants to make sure the money is spent wisely.

"I have a keen insight into how we use art in civic life in Palo Alto," Weiss said. "I feel we could do a little better with arts here."

Aside from Klein, none of the candidates have sat on the council before. Holman, who sits on the Planning and Transportation Commission, is the only candidate who is currently serving on a major local board.

Holman said she is running to promote "transparency and accountability" and to improve the city's land-use practices. As a commissioner, she has been a leading critic of dense developments that don't conform to the city's Comprehensive Plan and a major advocate for private open space at new housing complexes.

Holman's campaign committee includes all four councilmen not seeking reelection Pat Burt, Sid Espinosa, Gred Schmid and Yiaway Yeh and her list of early endorsers comprises an extensive catalogue of neighborhood leaders, business owners, local commissioners and former elected officials.

The candidate list also includes a large group of newcomers, many of whom said their top priority on the council would be adopting a balanced, sustainable budget. Scharff, a local attorney, said he would work toward making Palo Alto more "fiscally responsible." Scharff also said he opposes the proposed business-license tax, which he called "a job killer."

Scharff is one of four attorneys in the race, along with Hackmann, Levens and Klein. Hackmann has also been a vocal critic of the proposed tax, which will also be on the ballot in November.

"The way it's written is quite burdensome," Scharff said of the tax. "It's really going to hurt the small employees."

Local realtor Leon Leong also said he is against the proposed tax, which he said will mainly impact small, community-serving

businesses. Leong also said he would focus on land-use issues, particularly the impact of large, new developments on local neighborhoods.

"I think the council needs voices that will represent the interests of Palo Alto, especially in areas like housing density and promoting a good fiscal economy," Leong said.

Steen, a local conservationist who has served on numerous land trusts and worked as a public-information officer with the U.S. Forest Service, also ranked land-use high on his priority list. He also said one of his top priorities would be working to make sure the proposed high-speed rail is designed in a way that benefits Palo Alto. Steen has been working with a group of local businessmen, architects and city officials on studying the potential costs and impacts of building train tracks underground.

"I'm assuming the high-speed rail is coming one way or another into our community," Steen said. "It's my responsibility to bring it here in the way that presents the least amount of impact."

Gaither, meanwhile, is a former member of the Board of Directors at La Comida, a local nonprofit that serves hot meals to seniors. Gaither has also previously served as property manager at Sheridan Apartments and worked as a financial analyst.

The council is guaranteed to have at least four new members at the closing of this year, with Yoriko Kishimoto and Jack Morton both termed out. Mayor Peter Drekmeier and Councilman John Barton were up for reelection and have chosen not to seek another term because of family and work commitments, respectively.

At least one candidates forum has already been scheduled. The [www.paneighborhoods.org Palo Alto Neighborhoods] (PAN) group will hold an event Wednesday, Oct. 7, from 7 to 9 p.m. at the Palo Alto Art Center Auditorium, 1313 Newell Road, Palo Alto.

The forum will feature candidate questions and answers moderated by former City Council member Hillary Freeman. It is open to the public and free of charge.

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