

The Almanac

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Willow Road high-rise developer N17 files lawsuit against Menlo Park

City rejects allegations it broke law: 'We look forward to our day in court'

By Hannah Bensen

The legal showdown that Menlo Park officials warned of has swiftly come to fruition. N17, the developer behind the 80 Willow Road high-rise development, filed a lawsuit against the city on Friday, Oct. 2.

The lawsuit alleges that Menlo Park moved the goalposts for approval and delayed its review of the mixed-use development. The arguments echo those detailed in a July 29 letter from the state Attorney General's office, which accused Menlo Park of violating state housing law.

Menlo Park City Council member Drew Combs said that the lawsuit was not surprising, and added city officials were "thoughtful and deliberative" about their course of action.

"This was the possible, if not most likely, outcome that we were going to get from the council's action," Combs said.

"We look forward to our day in court."

N17's lawsuit begins by citing California's housing crisis and states that Menlo Park has "repeatedly refused to comply with state housing reform laws." It also argues that the development qualified for Assembly Bill 2011, a law that allows projects meeting certain requirements to receive "streamlined, ministerial review."

"In other words, the city is not permitted to say no to the project," the lawsuit states.

Just one day before the lawsuit was filed, Menlo Park sent a 65-page rebuttal to the Attorney General's office, saying it has complied with all applicable law and defending its handling of the application.

The proposed development at the longtime home of Sunset Magazine on the Palo Alto border, called Willow Park, would include a 130-room hotel, more



Seeger Gray

See **WILLOW LAWSUIT**, page 12

Cyclists ride past 80 Willow Road on the former Sunset Magazine campus in Menlo Park on Sept. 30.

See where Menlo Park City Council candidates stand on key issues

Six candidates vying for three seats respond to The Almanac's questionnaire

By Arden Margulis

Across Menlo Park, voters in three of the city's districts will elect their City Council representatives on the Nov. 3 ballot.

In District 1, which represents the Belle Haven and Bayshore neighborhoods, retired cyber security professional James Rohr is running against software engineer Wonman Lee to replace incumbent Cecilia Taylor.

Menlo Park Finance and Audit Commissioner Vamsi Velagapudi is challenging Councilmember Drew Combs — who is the only incumbent

seeking reelection this fall — to represent District 2, which includes the Willows, Flood Triangle, Suburban Park and Lorelei Manor neighborhoods.

Communications professional Charlotte Reed and Menlo Park Finance and Audit Commission member Laura Melahn are vying to succeed Mayor Betsy Nash, who did not to seek reelection to represent District 4 — which includes downtown Menlo Park and Allied Arts.

To help voters see where they stand on key issues, The Almanac sent a questionnaire to all six City Council hopefuls running for three district seats on the Nov. 3 ballot. Each

candidate was asked to answer if they favor or oppose six policies and to rate the city on eight areas.

Candidates were allowed to provide brief explanations of their answers, which are available on AlmanacNews.com.

District 1

The formerly red-lined Belle Haven does not have a full-service grocery store, pharmacy or many commercial businesses. While Willow Village, Meta's planned mega-development, promised to remedy that, the \$3.5 billion project is now on indefinite hiatus.

Belle Haven has seen some

major investments in recent years. The 37,000-square-foot Belle Haven Community Campus opened in 2024, replacing the old Onetta Harris Community Center, and the Ravenswood School District just finished its \$60 million renovation of Belle Haven Elementary School.

As candidates, Rohr and Lee see eye-to-eye on many things. Both oppose Measure P — a ballot initiative sparked by the City Council's plan to build affordable housing on three city-owned lots — which would require a citywide vote before any construction could take place on downtown parking

lots. Rohr and Lee both support fighting the state on 80 Willow Road, a high-rise development project with towers as tall as 39 stories at the former Sunset Magazine headquarters. Developer N17 filed a lawsuit

See **MENLO COUNCIL**, page 14



INSIDE

FALL HOME & REAL ESTATE

VIEWPOINT 18 | ARTS 20 | FOOD 22



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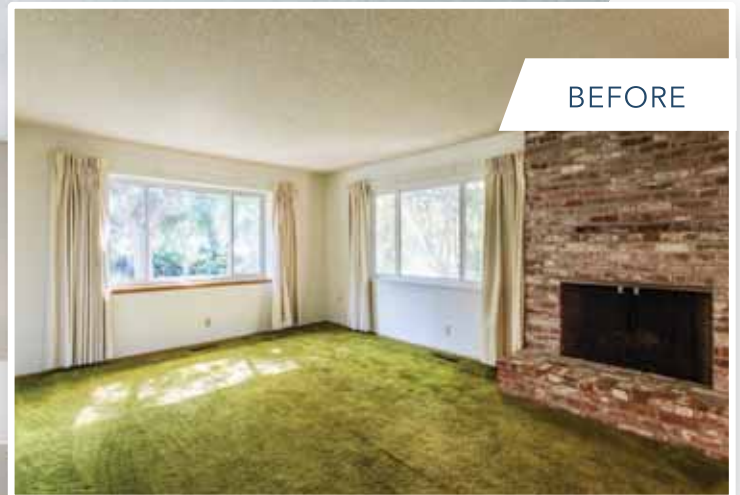
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Local News

MENLO PARK | AThERTON | WOODSIDE | PORTOLA VALLEY



Seeger Gray

An aerial view shows the dark-brown rooftops of Sunset Magazine's 6.7-acre former campus, which straddles both sides of Willow Road in Menlo Park.

Menlo Park rejects state accusations, says it followed law in handling of Willow Road high-rise project

City issues lengthy defense in showdown with state AG's office

By Hannah Bensen

In the latest sign of a possible legal showdown, Menlo Park forcefully rejected the state Attorney General's July 29 allegations that the city violated state housing law in processing the application for a controversial high-rise development at 80 Willow Road, according to an Oct. 1 letter.

"It is apparent from your letter that your office did not have the benefit of the entire project chronology," states Menlo Park's letter, signed by City Manager Justin Murphy. In it, Murphy notes that he's confident the city processed the application "in accordance with all applicable state laws," and adds that no one in the city was approached for information

before the Attorney General's office sent its letter.

The city's 65-page rebuttal lays out detailed arguments for Menlo Park's looming legal battle with the state, and comes days after Mayor Betsy Nash and her council colleagues vowed to fight the massive development at the 6.7-acre

See **CITY'S RESPONSE**, page 10

Candidate Comparison Grids: Where do Sequoia Union High School District candidates stand?

By Jennifer Yoshikoshi

The Sequoia Union High School District will have two seats on the Nov. 3 ballot, representing Areas A and D on the school board. Area A includes Redwood Shores, Belmont, San Carlos and parts of Redwood City and Area D encompasses central Menlo Park, North Fair Oaks and Atherton.

Incumbent Amy Koo, who represents Area A, is running

against Belmont resident Alon Shiran while Menlo Park resident Michael Deksheniaks is asking Area D voters to redirect their votes to him,

after incumbent Sathvik Nori dropped out of the race in August. Nori's name will still be on the ballot, and he has endorsed Deksheniaks.

To help voters understand where they stand on top issues involving the school board, The Almanac sent a questionnaire to all the candidates, asking about district finances, the decision to close TIDE Academy in Menlo Park,

See **SEQUOIA CANDIDATES**, page 16



Woodside whistleblower report continues to stir up controversy

Former town manager's \$2M discrimination claim set for mediation next month

By Jennifer Yoshikoshi

Eight months after the scathing whistleblower report by former Woodside Town Manager Jason Ledbetter went public, calls continue for further investigation into his long list of allegations against town officials. But threatened litigation by Ledbetter, who filed a \$2 million claim alleging a hostile work environment and gender discrimination, is keeping town officials quiet.

In May, Ledbetter received a "right to sue" notice from the state's Civil Rights Department after filing a discrimination complaint against the town of Woodside. Ledbetter and the town have a mediation session scheduled for November, according to Interim Town Manager Pam Antil.

"The town of Woodside and former Town Manager Jason Ledbetter have agreed to participate in private mediation to address his claims," said Antil in a written statement. "Mediation is designed to allow the parties to discuss their respective legal positions in confidence before an experienced mediator, to hopefully resolve their dispute short of litigation."

In the complaint, Ledbetter alleges that Councilmember Jenn Wall harassed and discriminated against him because of his gender and that he experienced retaliation after releasing his whistleblower report in February.

Ledbetter allegedly raised concerns of gender discrimination to town staff prior to drafting his 14-page report but "no investigation was conducted and no steps (were) taken to ensure Ms. Wall ceased her discriminatory conduct."

His complaint adds that the "town falsely accused Ledbetter of engaging in criminal conduct and subsequently terminated his employment," because of his whistleblower report. After sending the report to the town attorney, Ledbetter asked for a severance package worth \$400,000, or said he would

release the report to the public. The Town Council declined and he sent his report to The Almanac and a number of other Woodside residents.

According to the town, Ledbetter's claim also alleges defamation, wrongful termination, intentional infliction of emotional distress, loss of wages and benefits and reputational harm.

Ledbetter's whistleblower report

In the whistleblower report, Ledbetter accused Mayor Brian Dombkowski and Mayor Pro-Tem Paul Goeld of delaying housing projects, violating the state's open meeting law, and gender and racial discrimination toward councilmembers Wall and Hassan Aburish.

In April, the town's third-party investigation by Stallard Panebianco P.C. sustained only one of 11 of Ledbetter's allegations: Goeld admitted to sharing details of closed session discussions about Ledbetter's hiring process with him. Since sharing the information isn't a criminal violation, the San Mateo County District Attorney's office declined to prosecute.

At a July Town Council meeting, Goeld publicly apologized for disclosing private discussions with Ledbetter, who was hired in April 2025. During that same meeting, Goeld recused himself when council members came under fire for not reopening the investigation and holding Goeld accountable.

Wall moved to hold a hearing to consider a censure or reprimand against Goeld that failed in a tie vote, with Dombkowski and Council member Dick Brown opposed and Goeld recused.

Tension between council and community

Last month, Planning Commissioner Matt Garr pressured the council to hold members accountable for their alleged actions.

See **WHISTLEBLOWER**, page 13

Public Notices

BEAM LEADERSHIP STUDIO + APOTHECARY
FICTITIOUS BUSINESS NAME STATEMENT
FILE NO.: M-304855

The following person (persons) is (are) doing business as:

1.) BEAM LEADERSHIP STUDIO + APOTHECARY , located at 2995 Woodside Road #110, Woodside, CA 94062.

Registered owner(s):

BEAM LEADERSHIP, LLC

2995 Woodside Road #110

Woodside, CA 94062

State of Incorporation/Organization: California

This business is conducted by: a Limited Liability Company.

Registrant has not yet begun to transact business under the fictitious business name(s) listed above.

This statement was filed with the County Clerk-Recorder of San Mateo County on September 03, 2026.

(ALM Sep 18, 25, Oct 2 and 9, 2026)

DC AUTO COLLISION
FICTITIOUS BUSINESS NAME STATEMENT
FILE NO.: M-304889

The following person (persons) is (are) doing business as:

1.) DC AUTO COLLISION , located at 140 SOUTH LINDEN AVE UNIT D, SOUTH SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94080.

Registered owner(s):

SSF AUTO CENTER INC

140 SOUTH LINDEN AVE UNIT D

SOUTH SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94080

State of Incorporation/Organization: CA

This business is conducted by: a Corporation.

Registrant has begun to transact business under the fictitious business name(s) listed above on 07/15/2014.

This statement was filed with the County Clerk-Recorder of San Mateo County on September 09, 2026.

(ALM Sep 18, 25, Oct 2 and 9, 2026)

HAYWARD
HAYWARD BUILDERS CENTER
HAYWARD BUILDING SYSTEMS
HAYWARD DOOR AND WINDOW
HAYWARD HOME DESIGN CENTER
HAYWARD LUMBER AND HOME SUPPLY
HAYWARD LUMBER CO.
HAYWARD SERVICE CENTER
HAYWARD LUMBER
HAYWARD LUMBER COMPANY
FICTITIOUS BUSINESS NAME STATEMENT
FILE NO.: M-305003

The following person (persons) is (are) doing business as:

1.) HAYWARD , 2.) HAYWARD BUILDERS CENTER , 3.) HAYWARD BUILDING SYSTEMS , 4.) HAYWARD DOOR AND WINDOW , 5.) HAYWARD HOME DESIGN CENTER , 6.) HAYWARD LUMBER AND HOME SUPPLY , 7.) HAYWARD LUMBER CO. , 8.) HAYWARD SERVICE CENTER , 9.) HAYWARD LUMBER , 10.) HAYWARD LUMBER COMPANY , located at 2511 Garden Road, Suite A300, Monterey, CA 93940. Mailing Address: PO BOX 16009 Monterey, CA 93942.

Registered owner(s):

HOMER T. HAYWARD LUMBER CO.

2511 Garden Road, Suite A300

Monterey, CA 93940

State of Incorporation/Organization: California

This business is conducted by: a Corporation.

Registrant has begun to transact business under the fictitious business name(s) listed above on 01/01/2013.

This statement was filed with the County Clerk-Recorder of San Mateo County on September 24, 2026.

(ALM Oct 9, 16, 23 and 30, 2026)

ENHANCE PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES
FICTITIOUS BUSINESS NAME STATEMENT
FILE NO.: M-304995

The following person (persons) is (are) doing business as:

1.) ENHANCE PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES , located at 899 Santa Cruz Ave., Suite 200, Menlo Park, CA 94025 .

Registered owner(s):

ENHANCE PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES, PC

899 Santa Cruz Ave., Suite 200

Menlo Park, CA 94025

State of Incorporation/Organization: CA

This business is conducted by: a Corporation.

Registrant has begun to transact business under the fictitious business name(s) listed above on 01/05/2026.

This statement was filed with the County Clerk-Recorder of San Mateo County on September 23, 2026.

(ALM Oct 2, 9, 16 and 23, 2026)

DAISY’S FLORALS
FICTITIOUS BUSINESS NAME STATEMENT
FILE NO.: M-304721

The following person (persons) is (are) doing business as:

1.) DAISY’S FLORALS , located at 2853 Holland St., San Mateo, CA 94403.

Registered owner(s):

GISELLE ESPINOZA HERNANDEZ

2853 Holland St.

San Mateo, CA 94403

CASSANDRA SANCHEZ

2853 Holland St.

San Mateo, CA 94403

MICAH EUNICE DAYAG

2853 HOLLAND ST.

San Mateo, CA 94403

This business is conducted by: a General Partnership.

Registrant has begun to transact business under the fictitious business name(s) listed above on 02/03/26.

This statement was filed with the County Clerk-Recorder of San Mateo County on August 20, 2026.

(ALM Sep 25, Oct 2, 9 and 16, 2026)

INDIA GROCERY OUTLET
FICTITIOUS BUSINESS NAME STATEMENT
FILE NO.: M-305050

The following person (persons) is (are) doing business as:

1.) INDIA GROCERY OUTLET , located at 336 Alden St, Redwood City, CA 94063. Mailing Address: 4021 Pacific Blvd San Mateo, CA 94403

Registered owner(s):

MANUBHAI TANDEL

4021 PACIFIC BLVD

San Mateo CA 94403

State of Incorporation/Organization:

Califronia

This business is conducted by: an Individual.

Registrant has not yet begun to transact business under the fictitious business name(s) listed above.

This statement was filed with the County Clerk-Recorder of San Mateo County on October 01, 2026.

(ALM Oct 9, 16, 23 and 30, 2026)

BAY AREA SERVICES: PLUMBING & ELECTRICAL
FICTITIOUS BUSINESS NAME STATEMENT
FILE NO.: M-304910

The following person (persons) is (are) doing business as:

1.) BAY AREA SERVICES: PLUMBING & ELECTRICAL , located at 533 Airport Blvd, Ste. 400, Burlingame, CA 94010.

Registered owner(s):

CHRIS PLUMBING BAY AREA SERVICES CORP.

533 Airport Blvd, Ste. 400

Burlingame, CA 94010

State of Incorporation/Organization:

California

This business is conducted by: a Corporation.

Registrant has not yet begun to transact business under the fictitious business name(s) listed above.

This statement was filed with the County Clerk-Recorder of San Mateo County on September 11, 2026.

(ALM Sep 18, 25, Oct 2 and 9, 2026)

JOYA SUPERMARKET 2
FICTITIOUS BUSINESS NAME STATEMENT
FILE NO.: M-304845

The following person (persons) is (are) doing business as:

1.) JOYA SUPERMARKET 2 , located at 388-390 GRAND AVE., SOUTH SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94080.

Registered owner(s):

JOYA SUPERMARKET 2 INC

388-390 GRAND AVE.

SOUTH SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94080

State of Incorporation/Organization:

CALIFORNIA

This business is conducted by: a Corporation.

Registrant has begun to transact business under the fictitious business name(s) listed above on 08/01/2026.

This statement was filed with the County Clerk-Recorder of San Mateo County on September 02, 2026.

(ALM Sep 25, Oct 2, 9 and 16, 2026)

CUSTOMIZED ELECTRICAL SERVICES
FICTITIOUS BUSINESS NAME STATEMENT
FILE NO.: M-304712

The following person (persons) is (are) doing business as:

1.) CUSTOMIZED ELECTRICAL SERVICES , located at 941 TAFT ST, REDWOOD CITY, CA 94061.

Registered owner(s):

JOSUE VIDANA

941 TAFT ST

REDWOOD CITY, CA 94061

This business is conducted by: an Individual.

Registrant has begun to transact business under the fictitious business name(s) listed above on 03/26/2009.

This statement was filed with the County Clerk-Recorder of San Mateo County on August 19, 2026.

(ALM Sep 18, 25, Oct 2 and 9, 2026)

FEDORA FIDUCIARY
FICTITIOUS BUSINESS NAME STATEMENT
FILE NO.: M-304875

The following person (persons) is (are) doing business as:

1.) FEDORA FIDUCIARY , located at 3341 Melendy Drive, San Carlos, CA 94070.

Registered owner(s):

SHANNON L. KAMPA

3341 Melendy Drive

San Carlos, CA 94070

This business is conducted by: an Individual.

Registrant has not yet begun to transact business under the fictitious business name(s) listed above.

This statement was filed with the County Clerk-Recorder of San Mateo County on September 08, 2026.

(ALM Sep 25, Oct 2, 9 and 16, 2026)

HEXMONGER
FICTITIOUS BUSINESS NAME STATEMENT
FILE NO.: M-304939

The following person (persons) is (are) doing business as:

1.) HEXMONGER , located at 17 Almendral Ave, Atherton, CA 94027.

Registered owner(s):

NATHANIEL VOORHIES

17 Almendral Ave

Atherton, CA 94027

This business is conducted by: an Individual.

Registrant has not yet begun to transact business under the fictitious business name(s) listed above.

This statement was filed with the County Clerk-Recorder of San Mateo County on September 15, 2026.

(ALM Sep 25, Oct 2, 9 and 16, 2026)

ORDER TO SHOW CAUSE FOR CHANGE OF NAME SUPERIOR COURT OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA FOR THE COUNTY OF SAN MATEO

Case No.: 26-CIV-07084

TO ALL INTERESTED PERSONS:

Petitioner: Soujanya Kedilaya Akirebari filed a petition with this court for a decree changing names as follows:

SOUJANYA KEDILAYA AKIREBARI to SOUJANYA KEDILAYA

THE COURT ORDERS that all persons interested in this matter appear before

this court at the hearing indicated below to show cause, if any, why the petition for change of name should not be granted.

Any person objecting to the name changes described above must file a written

objection that includes the reasons for the objection at least two court days before the

matter is scheduled to be heard and must appear at the hearing to show cause why the

petition should not be granted. If no written objection is timely filed, the court may grant

the petition without a hearing.

NOTICE OF HEARING: 11-19-2026, 9:00 AM, Southern Branch of the Superior Court of California, County of San Mateo County

located at 400 County Center, Redwood City, CA 94063.

A copy of this ORDER TO SHOW CAUSE shall be published at least once each week for

four successive weeks prior to the date set for hearing on the petition in the following

newspaper of general circulation, printed in this county:

ALMANAC

Date: 09-16-2026

Hon. Stephanie G. Garratt

JUDGE OF THE SUPERIOR COURT

(ALM Oct 2, 9, 16 and 23, 2026)

ORDER TO SHOW CAUSE FOR CHANGE OF NAME SUPERIOR COURT OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA FOR THE COUNTY OF SAN MATEO

Case No.: 26CIV05602

TO ALL INTERESTED PERSONS:

Petitioner: Elizabeth Herrick and Ian Sachs for Minors filed a petition with this court for a decree changing names as follows:

ELOISE BROOKS SACHS to ELOISE BROOKS SACHS HERRICK

PIA LILIANA SACHS to PIA LILIANA SACHS HERRICK

THE COURT ORDERS that all persons

interested in this matter appear before

this court at the hearing indicated below to show cause, if any, why the petition for

change of name should not be granted.

Any person objecting to the name changes described above must file a written

objection that includes the reasons for the objection at least two court days before the

matter is scheduled to be heard and must appear at the hearing to show cause why the

petition should not be granted. If no written objection is timely filed, the court may grant

the petition without a hearing.

NOTICE OF HEARING: November 23, 2026, 9:00 AM, Southern Branch of the Superior

Court of California, County of San Mateo located at 400 County Center, Redwood City,

CA 94063.

A copy of this ORDER TO SHOW CAUSE shall be published at least once each week for

four successive weeks prior to the date set for hearing on the petition in the following

newspaper of general circulation, printed in this county:

ALMANAC

Date: September 21, 2026

Stephanie Garratt

JUDGE OF THE SUPERIOR COURT

(ALM Oct 2, 9, 16 and 23, 2026)

ORDER TO SHOW CAUSE FOR CHANGE OF NAME SUPERIOR COURT OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA FOR THE COUNTY OF SAN MATEO

Case No.: 26CIV07085

TO ALL INTERESTED PERSONS:

Petitioner: Brooke Williams Kvingedal

filed a petition with this court for a decree changing names as follows:

BROOKE WILLIAMS KVINGEDAL to BROOKE ALAINE WILLIAMS

THE COURT ORDERS that all persons interested in this matter appear before

this court at the hearing indicated below to show cause, if any, why the petition for

change of name should not be granted.

Any person objecting to the name changes described above must file a written

objection that includes the reasons for the objection at least two court days before the

matter is scheduled to be heard and must appear at the hearing to show cause why the

petition should not be granted. If no written objection is timely filed, the court may grant

the petition without a hearing.

NOTICE OF HEARING: 11/18/2026, 9:00, Southern Branch of the Superior Court of California, County of San Mateo located at

400 County Center, Redwood City, CA 94063.

A copy of this ORDER TO SHOW CAUSE shall be published at least once each week for

four successive weeks prior to the date set for hearing on the petition in the following

newspaper of general circulation, printed in this county:

ALMANAC

Date: 9/16/2026

Stephanie Garratt

JUDGE OF THE SUPERIOR COURT

(ALM Oct 2, 9, 16 and 23, 2026)

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The Almanac

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Meet the Sequoia Union High School District candidates

By Jennifer Yoshikoshi

Area A: Amy Koo

Amy Koo is the parent of two Sequoia Union High School District students and is currently representing Area A, which includes Redwood Shores, Belmont, San Carlos and parts of Redwood City. She told The Almanac that she's running for re-election to continue the work she started during her first term. She's facing challenger Alon Shiran on the Nov. 3 ballot.



Amy Koo

Koo said her priorities are similar to her first term: Improving communication, recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers, improving operational and fiscal responsibility, and creating a safe and inclusive environment.

Koo's background is in engineering but she currently works as a financial educator and planner. Her past experiences have given her analytical skills, allowing her to look at everything from a strategic standpoint, she said.

Over the last four years, Koo said the board has been able to conduct a communications audit, launch a new website, produce an internal newsletter for parents and staff and provide parents with a platform that tracks student achievements.

For her second term, Koo is looking forward to working on "things that are harder to implement ... where the rubber meets the road."

As other parents, including candidates for the school board, make it a priority to restore all ninth-grade advanced courses at district campuses, Koo is firmly against the idea. She said high school should be a place where students can figure out what they're interested in by the time they graduate without having to feel stressed and anxious.

"Ninth grade is kind of a big melting pot," she said. "The students are coming from many different places, so we want to free up time for them to explore different things."

Koo said students should be challenged, but "not so much that they're doing it for the wrong reasons," due to the pressure of "checking all the boxes to get into a top college." Rather, students should pursue advanced classes in subjects that interest them, she added.

The recent closure of TIDE Academy in Menlo Park, the increase in lawsuits against the

district and growing discontent from parents about advanced courses have contributed to tensions between some parents and the school board. Koo said she thinks continuing to improve district communications and broadening methods of sharing information is one way to regain the community's trust.

Koo said she is aware that the public is concerned that the board is "not listening" or "not engaging and taking their opinions." She adds that not every decision the district makes will be supported by all groups, but as long as people understand the rationale behind it and can accept the decision, the board has done its job.

"I'm a pretty transparent person and that's really what you're voting for — someone who is open to listening and taking in different inputs," Koo said. "I do my research. I'm open-minded. I talk about change and I advocate for change."

For more information on Koo's campaign, visit amykoo.org.

Area A: Alon Shiran

Alon Shiran is a Belmont resident and parent of three prospective Sequoia Union High School District students. While his oldest is still in middle school, Shiran said he hopes to serve on the high school district's board to make changes that will increase opportunities and academic success for students.



Alon Shiran

Shiran is running against incumbent Amy Koo for the Area A seat, which includes Redwood Shores, Belmont, San Carlos and parts of Redwood City, in the Nov. 3 election.

Shiran is currently working as a product executive at ERGO NEXT insurance in Palo Alto. His children are currently enrolled in first grade, fifth grade and seventh grade at Sequoia Union feeder schools.

As he pursues a seat on the board, Shiran said he is focused on restoring academic excellence with honors and advanced courses; fiscal discipline and transparency; offering a future-ready curriculum; and providing community engagement and accountability.

Shiran said his family moved to Belmont because of the area's public schools. With his oldest child headed toward high school, he is invested in the district his children will be attending over the next decade.

He said he was inspired to run for the school board after seeing the district "capping opportunities by removing some of the advanced and honors classes with the hopes that it closed the achievement gap." Shiran said he disagreed with the board's choice and thinks this will only limit students' opportunities.

"Many of the families are not aware of this direction that we're taking in our schools to close these opportunities for our kids with advanced and honors classes. So I think increasing the awareness of that is going to be very important, before it's too late," Shiran said.

He added that there is "too much chaos" within the district as it faces multiple lawsuits, legal settlements and parents' attempts to recall the three board members who are not up for election.

Shiran said he hopes to use his professional experiences in product management to help the board approach decisions with transparency and data-driven solutions.

"Not everybody's going to agree with every decision that the board makes, but there's a big difference between a consensus and an alignment," he said. "Alignment is when people understand why a decision is being made and they trust their representatives that they've done the best to represent their point of view."

If elected, Shiran said he plans to host office hours every few weeks to give people the opportunity to speak with him directly and regain the community's trust through transparency.

For more information on his campaign, visit alonforschools.com.

Area D: Michael Deksheniek

As a parent of two Menlo-Atherton High School graduates, Sequoia Union High School District Area D candidate Michael "Deks" Deksheniek said he is running for a school board seat to improve community engagement, student safety, data-driven policymaking and financial leadership.

Area D includes central Menlo Park, North Fair Oaks and Atherton.

Deksheniek is currently volunteering as an assistant coach for the M-A girl's lacrosse team and has been an advocate for restoring ninth grade honors courses and preserving academic excellence across all of SUHSD campuses. He is also a Navy veteran and currently works as a tech executive at ETAM Systems.

For his campaign, Deksheniek is working on redirecting voters to check his name on the ballot, after his opponent, incumbent Sathvik Nori, dropped out of the race in August. Nori, whose name will still be on the ballot, said he encourages Area D voters to support Deksheniek for the school board seat.

As a decades-long resident of Menlo Park and active member of the community, Deksheniek said other parents in the district encouraged him to run, while sharing concerns that the board lacked a parent who was up-to-date on current issues.

"I feel like I'm in a unique position because I've had kids



Michael Deksheniek

that go through the district, I'm current on the issues, and I feel like I can help given my experience in the professional world," he said.

Deksheniek said he has been involved with the district and community over the last six to seven years. He's attended board meetings, listened to public comments and is also involved in the parent group Students First, which is advocating for the restoration of honors and advanced courses for ninth graders.

See **SEQUOIA PROFILES**, page 16



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Menlo Park District 1 council candidates aren't asking residents for donations

James Rohr self-funds, Wonman Lee's donors are friends and family

By Arden Margulis

Candidates for the District 1 seat on the Menlo Park City Council are largely self-funding their campaigns, in contrast with candidates in other districts who are raising tens of thousands of dollars.

Both candidates on the Nov. 3 ballot in District 1, which includes Menlo Park's Belle Haven and Bayshore neighborhoods, said they have chosen not to ask

residents for campaign donations due to economic pressures.

Retired cybersecurity professional James Rohr's campaign reported spending more than \$2,000 as of Sept. 19. Software engineer Wonman Lee reported raising \$3,500 and spending \$5,300 as of that date, according to campaign filings.

Rohr said his campaign is entirely self-funded.

"(I) know the people of our district have more pressing needs

than giving money to a campaign," Rohr said in an email.

Lee told The Almanac that friends and family have funded most of his campaign.

"I chose not to ask District 1 families for money directly, given how hard this economy has been on so many of them," Lee said in an email. "Instead, I've asked for their time, so I can share my message and earn their vote."

In California, campaigns that receive or spend less than \$2,000



James Rohr



Wonman Lee



Explore candidate grids, profiles and campaign finance coverage at AlmanacNews.com/election/voter-guide-2026.

are not required to disclose their funding sources or exact totals. Because Rohr crossed that threshold at the end of the most recent filing period, he will not be required to provide a detailed contributor list until at least Oct. 22.

Lee's campaign reported more than \$3,000 in unpaid bills, primarily on a business credit card. Lee said most of his spending has gone toward printed materials and mailers and he has not hired political consultants.

"I support public financing for local races, so that running for City Council depends more on your message than on the size of your wallet," Lee said.

Proposition 4, a statewide measure on the November ballot, would repeal California's prohibition on public financing of elections.

In District 4, Charlotte Reed reportedly raised \$17,000

and Laura Melahn collected \$5,600 as they vie to replace Councilmember Betsy Nash, who is not seeking reelection to represent downtown Menlo Park and Allied Arts. Vamsi Velagapudi raised \$9,900 compared to incumbent Drew Combs, who raised \$8,800 in the race for District 2 — which represents the Willows, Flood Triangle, Lorelei Manor and Suburban Park.

The next deadline for filing reports covering contributions and expenditures from Sept. 20 through Oct. 17 is on Oct. 22. ■

Email Staff Writer Arden Margulis at amargulis@almanacnews.com.

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Menlo Park District 4 hopeful outraises opponent by over \$10K

Charlotte Reed reports three times more in campaign donations than Laura Melahn

By Arden Margulis

Singer and communications professional Charlotte Reed is far outraising her opponent in the District 4 race — and all other Menlo Park City Council district candidates on the Nov. 3 ballot — in her bid to succeed Mayor Betsy Nash.

Reed received \$16,950 in monetary and non-monetary contributions during the reporting period ending Sept. 19. Her opponent, Laura Melahn, collected \$5,560 in contributions and loaned her own campaign \$4,280.

"Political fundraising is all about inviting people to be



Charlotte Reed



Laura Melahn



shareholders in a better future, and I'm deeply humbled by the neighbors who have invested in our movement," Reed said in an email. "This record-breaking fundraising effort proves I am the only viable choice for Menlo Park City Council District 4."

Melahn, a venture capitalist and member of Menlo Park's Finance and Audit Commission, said she is proud that all but two of her campaign's contributions came from Menlo Park residents. Of her 26 contributors, the only non-Menlo Park donations were \$250 from former

See **DISTRICT 4 FINANCE**, page 12

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Shelter-in-place ordered after Woodside construction project causes gas leak

By Jennifer Yoshikoshi

Woodside residents were ordered to shelter in place on Oct. 1 after a gas leak was reported on Woodside Road near Martin Lane around 10:15 a.m. The

shelter-in-place order lasted for about an hour, until Woodside Fire Protection District personnel cleared the scene at 11:45 a.m., fire officials said.

Firefighters said that construction workers accidentally drilled into a residential gas supply line

while working on fencing and fractured it, causing the leak. Martin Lane resident Orlando Nell said the area smelled like rotten eggs.

One residence in the 3300 block of Woodside Road was evacuated, along with the

workers onsite, according to Woodside Fire Battalion Chief Keenan Hird.

PG&E also responded to the scene and the gas line was secured by 11:27 a.m.

The San Mateo County Sheriff's Office assisted with traffic

control while the eastbound lane of Woodside Road was closed during the incident, according to Woodside Fire officials. ■

*Email Staff Writer
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jyoshikoshi@almanacnews.com.*

CITY'S RESPONSE

continued from page 5

campus on the Palo Alto border that was the longtime home of Sunset Magazine. Legal representatives for the developer, San Francisco-based N17, have threatened to sue the city if its "Willow Park" development is not approved by Oct. 27, and the state Attorney General's office warned of steep fines.

The Willow Park application calls for a 130-room hotel, more than 300,000 square feet of office space, 665 housing units, a preschool and some retail space, in buildings as high as 39 stories, or 458 feet tall.

The city's rebuttal comes a little over two months after California Attorney General Rob Bonta's office sent the city a letter alleging that Menlo Park violated the Affordable Housing and High Road Jobs Act of 2022 — known

as Assembly Bill 2011. The law creates a streamlined, by-right approval process for affordable and mixed-income housing developments on commercially-zoned land, allowing developers to bypass the discretionary local review and exempting qualifying developments from environmental review if specific criteria are met.

The July 29 letter also accuses Menlo Park of failing to provide builder's remedy protections to the developer, which the Attorney General's office says is required under the Housing Accountability Act, and of unlawfully requiring the applicant to pay for the city's legal counsel.

In his letter, Murphy said that Menlo Park rejects all of the allegations and expressed concern that the Attorney General's office did not ask the city for any information or

context before sending its July 29 letter. According to Murphy, N17's development plan "grossly exceeded the density and development standards" needed to qualify for AB 2011 at the time.

In response to the alleged Housing Accountability Act (HAA) violations, the city said the project does not qualify for the law's "builder's remedy" protections because the development application submitted by N17 on May 24, 2024, did not include the required amount of residential space — 53.3% of the Willow Park project's total square footage was designated residential, below the HAA's 66.7% threshold for residential space in a mixed-use development.

"With the exception of the 100 required units of affordable housing, it is primarily a commercial project with luxury housing," the letter states, adding that, due to the steep cost

of high-rise development, the projected rents for a market-rate two-bedroom apartment at Willow Park would be \$9,542 per month. "There is no doubt that the vast majority of the housing in this project would be affordable only to the very wealthiest residents of the Bay Area."

Additionally, the city stated that HAA "does not prohibit the city from passing the cost of application review to the project applicant."

In his letter, Murphy says the development's ownership "raises alarm" for the city. The property is reportedly owned by Vitaly Yusufov, a Russian businessman with alleged ties to top Russian government officials, including former president and prime minister Dmitry Medvedev. Medvedev has been sanctioned by the U.S. government.

Last week, Rep. Sam Liccardo sent a letter to U.S. Treasury

Secretary Scott Bessent urging an investigation into the development's ownership and financing, and to consider Yusufov for economic sanctions.

On Wednesday, Sept. 30, Councilmember Drew Combs said in his newsletter that a "serious" potential new buyer for the property has emerged and is willing to pay more than the property's 2018 sale price of \$72 million. The buyer has not been named, but is "very familiar with the property and values its historical significance" and, if purchased, intends to make only "minimal interior modifications" to the existing campus. ■

Hannah Bensen is a recipient of the California Local News Fellowship who is a member of the Embarcadero Media Foundation Staff through 2027. She can be reached at hbensen@almanacnews.com.



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WILLOW LAWSUIT

continued from page 1

than 300,000 square feet of office space and 665 housing units. It would also include a preschool and retail space, and feature buildings as high as 39 stories, or 458 feet tall.

The lawsuit sets in motion a legal battle between developer N17 and Menlo Park that could test the reach of state housing laws. The financial consequences could be “severe,” city officials acknowledged, and Mayor Betsy Nash has said that litigation costs could threaten city services. On Friday, Nash declined to comment on the lawsuit.

N17 founder Oisín Heneghan did not immediately respond to The Almanac’s request for comment, but characterized Menlo Park unfavorably in comments to the San Francisco Chronicle, which published a story about

the lawsuit Friday.

“Menlo Park is one of the most hostile cities to building new and affordable housing in the nation,” N17 founder Oisín Heneghan said, according to the Chronicle’s reporting. “We regret having to bring the lawsuit, but we had no choice, given the city has done nothing but throw roadblocks in our way to delay and deny the project, arrogantly breaking state housing laws.”

N17’s lawsuit comes days after the Sept. 29 Menlo Park City Council meeting, in which city officials asserted that Menlo Park would hold its ground. At the council meeting, City Attorney Nira Doherty characterized the threat of penalties as “deeply unfair and extremely punitive.”

On Oct. 1, Menlo Park sent an official response to the Attorney General’s office. In the 65-page letter, City

Manager Justin Murphy argues that the “city has taken its housing production goals very seriously.” Menlo Park rejected the state’s view that it violated state housing law, and stated that it had complied with all housing laws.

“The City Council believes it is important to get this right, even if there are financial consequences and service impacts for the city that may be triggered by our effort to vindicate our rights and protect the Menlo Park community,” said Nash at the Sept. 29 City Council meeting.

In an Aug. 25 letter to Attorney General Rob Bonta inviting him to Menlo Park to see the 80 Willow site for himself, Nash defended Menlo Park’s openness to building new housing, saying the office’s letter “implies that we are all NIMBYs who just don’t want housing. I believe our record shows quite the opposite.”

The city received the lawsuit Friday afternoon, after the Chronicle published its story, city spokesperson Kendra Calvert said.

“N17 Development’s lawsuit is based on inaccurate assumptions. The city’s letter to Attorney General Bonta provides in-depth conclusions on why the N17 Development application does not qualify for accelerated approvals,” Calvert said in a statement. “The city is committed to building housing and included the history of its housing production to meet state mandates in the letter.”

N17’s lawsuit comes after a recent report that a potential buyer of the 6.7-acre property at the corner of Middlefield Road intends to make “minimal interior modifications” to the existing campus. While N17 is the developer, the reported owner of the property is Vitaly Yusufov, a Russian businessman with ties

to Russian government officials.

Heneghan told the Chronicle that the project is “not for sale.” Heneghan has declined repeated requests to clarify his relationship with Yusufov, who allegedly is connected to former Russian president and prime minister Dmitri Medvedev. Medvedev is under U.S. sanctions, while Yusufov’s father, Igor, is sanctioned by Canada and Ukraine.

Congressman Sam Liccardo has called for a federal investigation into Yusufov’s connection to Willow Park, citing national security concerns. ■

Arden Margulis contributed to this report.

Hannah Bensen is a recipient of the California Local News Fellowship who is a member of the Embarcadero Media Foundation Staff through 2027. She can be reached at hbensen@almanacnews.com.

DISTRICT 4 FINANCE

continued from page 8

Menlo Park Councilmember Paul Collacchi, who now lives in Redwood City, and \$94.25 from a friend, she said.

“I’m not running on the back of any political machine or interest group, and my donors show it. This is a Menlo Park campaign, funded a little at a time by the people who call it home,” Melahn said in an email.

A significant share of Reed’s funds came from Menlo Park residents. Of her 70 donations, 33 came from Menlo Park residents and totaled \$12,600 of the \$16,800 she reported receiving.

Reed’s largest contribution came from Menlo Park writer Anne-Marie Strohmman, who gave \$5,900 to her campaign.

Reed also received contributions from Menlo Park Planning Commissioners Katie Behroozi and Nancy

Hedley, who gave \$250 and \$50, respectively, and Menlo Park Environmental Quality Commissioner John McKenna, who contributed \$50.

Reed’s campaign received support from regional elected officials and public figures. Campbell Mayor Sergio Lopez contributed \$100, San Mateo Planning Commissioner Seema Patel gave \$100 and San Mateo County Community College District Trustee John Pimentel, who lives in Menlo Park, donated \$250.

Melahn’s campaign received \$700 from Marnie Foody and \$250 from Paul Charrette, who founded the Downtown Menlo Fund with Melahn. She also received \$250 from Realtor Mary Gilles and \$250 from Dana Hendrickson, a contributing blogger for The Almanac.

Under California law, candidates are not required to provide details of contributors who provide less than

\$100 during a calendar year. Melahn, who received 12 contributions totalling \$970 that were not required to be itemized, provided The Almanac with those donors and their city of residence.

Other candidates in the race are Vamsi Velagapudi, who raised \$9,900 compared to incumbent Drew Combs’ \$8,800 in the race for District 2 — which represents the Willows, Flood Triangle, Lorelei Manor and Suburban Park — and James Rohr, whose self-funded campaign has spent over \$2,000 and Wonman Lee, who raised \$3,500. Both men are running in District 1, which includes Menlo Park’s Belle Haven and Bayshore neighborhoods.

Candidates must file updated financial reports by Oct. 22 covering transactions from Sept. 20 through Oct. 17. ■

Email Staff Writer Arden Margulis at amargulis@almanacnews.com.



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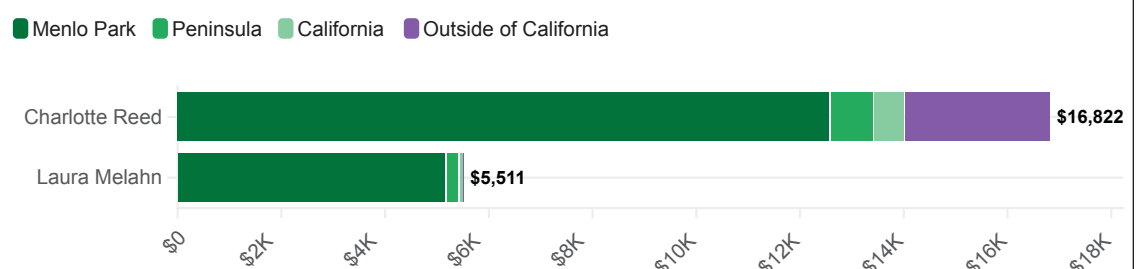
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Contributions to Menlo Park City Council District 4 race by region

Monetary and nonmonetary campaign contributions through Sept. 19 for the 2026 election



Source: City of Menlo Park and Laura Melahn • Note: Peninsula defined as San Francisco to Mountain View. Does not include loans. • Graphic by Arden Margulis.

WHISTLEBLOWER

continued from page 5

In public comment at the Sept. 8 Town Council meeting, Garr accused Dombkowski and Circulation Committee member Dan Druker of colluding to derail a plan to lower the speed limit near Woodside Elementary School to 15 mph in a series of messages sent from their personal accounts.

In an interview with The Almanac, Druker said that his emails with the mayor were not an attempt to block the 15 mph speed limit, which had been under discussion for two years over concerns for children's safety who walk to school along Woodside Road, which has no sidewalks. Instead, Druker said he sought to stop the committee's "suboptimal" draft of the 15 mph resolution from being presented to the council. This draft would have enforced the



Michael Molcsan

Woodside Town Council members listen as Jennifer Wall speaks at Independence Hall in Woodside on July 28.

lower speed limit 24 hours a day and extended beyond Woodside Elementary School's boundaries.

In February, the Town Council approved the speed limit reduction when children are present

and only within the school's property lines on Woodside Road.

In a letter to the council, Garr demanded the town retain an independent investigator with full access to internal town

communications on text messages and personal devices. He also asked for a corrective action hearing to be placed on the agenda and for clear communication policies to be set. Garr suggested that the San Mateo County Civil Grand Jury review the town's governance and open-meeting practices.

Antil responded to Garr's public comment by acknowledging the public's frustrations and pointed out that councilmembers aren't able to comment on the situation due to the threatened litigation.

"Individual council members and members of the public may continue to disagree with the outcome, but that disagreement does not invalidate the council's decision or require the town to continue bringing the same matter for consideration," Antil said.

When Wall began to ask questions about how the town could

proceed in fulfilling Garr's requests, she was shut down by Antil, who called for a recess. Wall was advised not to discuss anything "remotely related" to the investigation. Afterwards, Wall was able to finish asking her questions but received very short responses from Antil. ■

Email Staff Writer

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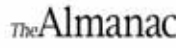


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MENLO COUNCIL
continued from page 1

against the city Oct. 2, alleging it is illegally delaying approval of the massive mixed-use project.

Rohr said he supports building affordable housing on city-owned land if it doesn't replace parks and Lee said he would be open to a land swap that would keep the same amount of space for parks.

However, the District 2 candidates differ on a number of issues. Rohr supports ending the city's use of automated license plate readers, and Lee wants to keep using the technology.

Rohr opposes reopening the eastbound side of the 600 block of Santa Cruz Avenue in downtown Menlo Park, which has been closed to cars since 2020. The City Council is planning to turn it into a pedestrian plaza. Lee said he wants to evaluate how widely used the plaza is before deciding.

District 2

District 2 is facing significant impacts from several major redevelopment projects in the Linfield Oaks neighborhood. The biggest is Willow Park, the controversial mixed-use high-rise project at the former headquarters of Sunset Magazine at 80 Willow Road. The development includes buildings up to 39 stories high, 665 housing units, a 130-room hotel, over 300,000 square feet of office space, plus retail space and a preschool.

Nearby residents in Menlo Park and Palo Alto, which borders the site, are concerned that the development will exacerbate traffic congestion on Middlefield and Willow roads. The Menlo Park City Council recently announced that it is prepared to cut city services to fund the fight against a lawsuit filed by the developer.

Both Combs and Velagapudi oppose Measure P. Combs and Velagapudi hold opposing views of how the city has performed on many issues, including managing its budget, responding to state housing mandates and equitably distributing resources.

On the 600 block of Santa Cruz Avenue Combs supports reopening the street to cars but converting parking spaces on the block to pedestrian seating. Velagapudi said he is undecided and would be interested in pedestrianizing more of downtown but would consider temporarily reopening the block to help struggling businesses.

When it comes to automated license plate readers, Velagapudi supports ending the city's use entirely. Combs said he supports ending the city's current contract with Flock Safety, a company that has faced national

MENLO PARK
CITY COUNCIL

Candidate Q&A

	DISTRICT 1		DISTRICT 2		DISTRICT 4	
	Wonman Lee	James Rohr	Drew Combs	Vamsi Velagapudi	Laura Melahn	Charlotte Reed
Do you favor or oppose...						
Measure P (requiring voter approval for housing on downtown parking lots)?	Oppose	Oppose	Oppose	Oppose	Abstain	Oppose
Reopening the 600 block of Santa Cruz Avenue to vehicles?	Abstain	Oppose	Favor	Abstain	Favor	Abstain
Cutting services to close the city's deficit?	Oppose	Oppose	Oppose	Oppose	Oppose	Oppose
Eliminating automated license plate readers?	Oppose	Favor	Favor	Favor	Favor	Favor
Taking legal action to stop the 80 Willow Road high-rise project?	Favor	Favor	Favor	Favor	Favor	Favor
Building affordable housing on city parks or the Civic Center?	Abstain	Favor	Favor	Abstain	Abstain	Oppose
Rate...						
Overall performance of the Menlo Park City Council	Fair	Fair	Good	Poor	Fair	Fair
Public safety and police response to crime	Fair	Good	Excellent	Fair	Good	Good
Menlo Park's approach to traffic mitigation	Very poor	Poor	Good	Poor	Poor	Poor
The city's fiscal management and budget oversight	Fair	Poor	Good	Very poor	Good	Poor
Equitable distribution of city resources across neighborhoods	Poor	Very poor	Excellent	Poor	Good	Fair
City's response to state housing mandates	Poor	Poor	Good	Poor	Poor	Poor
Quality of life in Menlo Park	Good	Good	Excellent	Good	Excellent	Fair
Vitality of the downtown business district	Poor	Fair	Fair	Poor	Fair	Poor

Survey conducted by Embarcadero Media and completed by candidates. Candidates were allowed to provide written explanations of their answers, which are available online.

scrutiny for unauthorized use of its data.

Both Combs and Velagapudi said they support building affordable housing on city-owned land but Velagapudi added that he would not support development on parks or green space.

District 4

Downtown Menlo Park has dominated many of the Menlo Park City Council's meetings over the past two years as the business community organized in opposition to a plan to build affordable housing and replacement parking on three downtown parking lots. Business and property owners contend that the development could be detrimental to the city's commercial center, which is already struggling with high vacancy rates. Residents organized to put a citizen's initiative, Measure P, on the ballot.

The council has made downtown vibrancy a priority, hoping

to fill empty storefronts and increase foot traffic. Earlier this year, councilmembers voted to allow more types of businesses after a property owner footed the bill for city staff to study it.

Melahn said she supports opening the 600 block of Santa Cruz Avenue to vehicles but restricting it to pedestrian-only during events while Reed declined to say where she stood on the closure.

Melahn is the only one of the six candidates who did not say she opposes Measure P, declining to reveal her position on the contentious issue. Melahn said she supports building affordable housing at the Burgess Civic Center but not on parks. Reed opposes building affordable housing on both.

Reed and Melahn both support ending the city's use of automated license plate readers. ■

Email Staff Writer Arden Margulis at amargulis@almanacnews.com.

COMMUNITY BRIEFS

Woodside Day of the Horse

The Woodside-area Horse Owners Association, also known as WHOA, is hosting its annual Day of the Horse celebration on Oct. 10-11. This year's theme is Year of the Fire Horse.

The weekend-long event starts with a trail ride from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m., Oct. 10, followed by an after-party from 1:30 to 4:30 p.m. Riders must register for the trail route in advance.

WHOA will be hosting a horse fair from 10:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., Oct. 11, at Town Hall, located at 2955 Woodside Road. The event will feature pony rides, food trucks, music, blacksmith demonstration and lots of horses.

For more information about the fair, visit whoa94062.org/horse-fair. To register for the trail ride, visit whoa94062.org/trail-ride.

SamTrans R.I.D.E. Team

SamTrans is inviting its riders to join its R.I.D.E. Team, which stands for Riders Influencing Decision and Experiences. This group offers riders the opportunity to share their opinions and experiences with SamTrans.

The only requirement is that you are a frequent rider of SamTrans and interested in providing feedback. Spanish and Chinese speakers are encouraged to sign-up.

The survey to join the R.I.D.E. Team is available on samtrans.com/ridepanel.

—Jennifer Yoshikoshi



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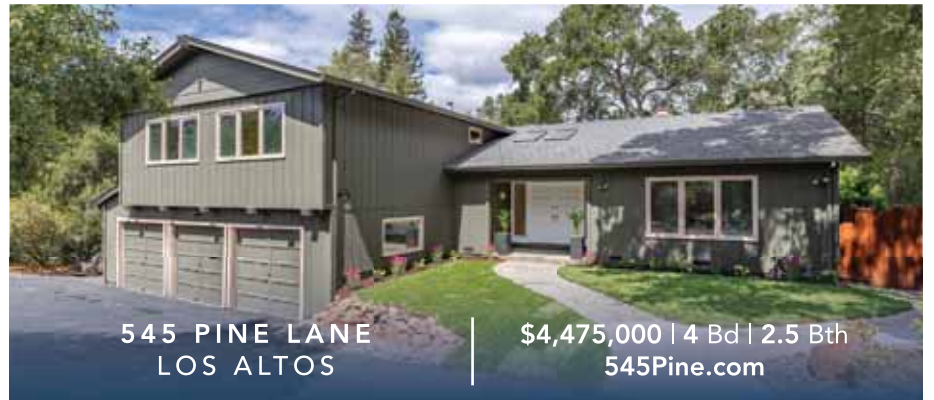
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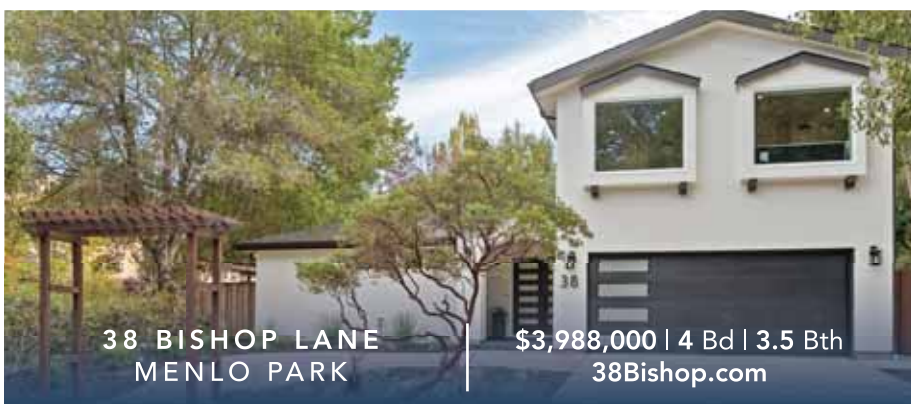
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NOTICE OF PUBLIC HEARING
BY THE WOODSIDE FIRE
PROTECTION DISTRICT
BOARD OF DIRECTORS

NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN that a Public Hearing will be held for the Woodside Fire Protection District Board of Directors to consider enacting the following proposed ordinance:

AN ORDINANCE OF THE WOODSIDE FIRE PROTECTION DISTRICT OF SAN MATEO COUNTY, CALIFORNIA AMENDING THE SCHEDULE OF FEES ESTABLISHED BY ORDINANCE NO. 26-01

The proposed ordinance is also identified as Ordinance 26-02.

All interested persons are invited to attend the Public Hearing and be heard on this matter. The Public Hearing will take place on October 27, 2026 at 6:00 PM at 808 Portola Road, Portola Valley, CA 94028. This meeting will be conducted in a hybrid format, and the public may also attend this meeting virtually. Details on participating by Zoom or other virtual format will be available on the published October 27, 2026 agenda for the Board of Directors meeting.

SUMMARY OF THE PROPOSED ORDINANCE: Ordinance No. 26-02 amends the District’s Fire Prevention fee schedule adopted by Ordinance No. 26-01 on May 26, 2026, as follows:

- Reduces the Public Records Act request fee from \$374 to \$0.10 per page.
- Adds a Pyrotechnic and Special Effects Permit fee of \$627.
- Adds a Fences Permit fee of \$283.
- Adds a Pre-Licensing Inspection fee for Institutional, Residential, and Day Care Occupancies of \$478.
- Adds a Fire Marshal cost recovery hourly rate of \$311 per hour.
- Adds an Expedited Plan Review fee, billed at actual outside consultant cost or in-house overtime cost.

The purpose of the ordinance is to establish updated fees, as defined in the California Constitution, that are no more than necessary to cover the reasonable costs of Fire District governmental activities, and that the manner in which those costs are allocated to a payor bear a fair or reasonable relationship to the payor’s burdens on, or benefits received from, the Fire District’s governmental activities. The fees established by the Ordinance are authorized pursuant to Health & Safety Code section 13916 and any other applicable provisions of California statutes and regulations.

All other fees adopted under Ordinance No. 26-01 remain unchanged. If adopted, the ordinance will take effect 30 days after passage.

All interested parties are encouraged and invited to submit written comments regarding the merits of the proposed ordinance prior to the hearing or participate in the public hearing. Reasonable accommodations will be made to individuals with disabilities. To submit comments electronically, please forward them to Kimberly Giuliani, Fire Marshal at kgiuliacci@woodsidefire.gov. To submit comments via U.S. Mail, please forward them to the Woodside Fire Protection District Fire Marshal to arrive no later than 5:00 p.m. one day prior to the meeting at the following address: 808 Portola Ave. #C, Portola Valley, CA 94028.

Please note that any challenge of the proposed action in court may be limited to addressing only those issues raised at the public hearing described in this notice, or in written correspondence submitted to the Fire Marshal at, or prior to, the public hearing.

The proposed Ordinance 26-02 will be made available for review online at <https://www.woodsidefire.org/our-district/fire-prevention-division/prevention-ordinances-and-resolutions> at least ten days before the October 27, 2026 meeting and will be available in the agenda packet for the October 27, 2026, meeting.

A certified copy of the proposed Ordinance 26-02 will also be available, at least ten days before the October 27, 2026 meeting, upon request by contacting the District Office, at (650) 851-1594, 808 Portola Rd. #C, Portola Valley, CA 94028.

The data indicating the amount of cost, or estimated cost, required to provide the service or the cost of enforcing any regulation for which the fees are charged, and the revenue sources anticipated to provide the service or the cost of enforcing any regulation, including general fund revenues, will be available for public inspection at the District Office, 808 Portola Rd. #C, Portola Valley, CA 94028, at least ten days before the October 27, 2026 meeting.

Run Dates: October 9 and October 16

SEQUOIA UNION HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT BOARD OF TRUSTEES

Candidate Q&A:
Positions on top issues

	Michael Dekshenieks	Amy Koo	Alon Shiran
Closing TIDE Academy was the right decision	Abstain	Yes	Abstain
The superintendent is doing a good job	Abstain	Yes	Abstain
All ninth graders should have access to honors and advanced courses	Yes	Abstain	Yes
The district spends too much on lawsuit settlements and legal fees	Yes	Yes	Yes
The Board of Trustees effectively advocates for students’ wellbeing and safety	Yes	Yes	No
The school board and district staff make decisions transparently	No	Yes	No

Survey conducted by Embarcadero Media and completed by candidates.

SEQUOIA CANDIDATES

continued from page 5

lawsuits, honors courses and transparency.

Candidates were asked to answer yes or no questions. They also were offered the opportunity to briefly explain their responses, capped at 150 characters, which is available on AlmanacNews.com.

Koo was the only candidate to respond that the closure of TIDE Academy, a small STEM-based high school, was the right decision for the district. Shiran and Dekshenieks both abstained, citing a lack of information on the tradeoffs and outstanding questions about the board’s

unanimous decision to close the school in February.

As the district faces multiple lawsuits alleging discrimination, sexual assault, wrongful termination and more, all candidates agreed that SUHSD is spending too much on legal fees and settlements.

Dekshenieks noted that the district’s “unusually high level of legal activity” could indicate other operational issues while Shiran said that avoiding settlement costs would free up funds that could be used in the classroom. Koo said the board continues to evaluate ways to reduce legal costs moving forward.

Transparency has been a key complaint among parents,

especially around the board’s decision to close TIDE. Koo is the only candidate to say that the school board and district are making decisions transparently. Dekshenieks said that the community’s trust has to be regained, and Shiran responded that too many district decisions are made without the community’s input.

On the topic of student safety, Shiran is the only candidate who believed the school board was not effectively advocating for student safety. He alluded to the district’s lawsuits and emphasized the importance of listening to students, acting early and addressing concerns before they turn into legal matters. ■

SEQUOIA PROFILES

continued from page 7

If elected, Dekshenieks foresees future challenges in the board’s discussions on AI policies, and continued conversations around cell phone restrictions. He hopes to be able to make the board’s policy-making decisions clearer for the community by educating the public on the process.

Dekshenieks wants to assure students and parents that they are being heard by the board. He said he is aware of the community’s recent concerns about the district’s structural deficit and the board’s decision to close TIDE Academy earlier this year.

Dekshenieks said he has met with each campus’ leadership team, connected with local parents and spoken with current board members. He said his goals align strongly with those of trustees Rich Ginn and Nori.

Dekshenieks said his name will soon be appearing on yard

signs, social media posts and email campaigns. To voters in Area D who may not have children at the district, he said he wants to remind them that “schools are in many ways a representation of the quality of your community.”

He has been endorsed by state Sen. Josh Becker, San Mateo County Supervisor Ray

Mueller and East Palo Alto Councilmember Mark Dinan. Dekshenieks is also supported by SUHSD trustees Ginn and Nori.

His website is michaeldeksfor.suhsd.com. ■

*Email Staff Writer
Jennifer Yoshikoshi at
jyoshikoshi@almanacnews.com.*



Magali Gauthier

The Sequoia Union High School District office in Redwood City.

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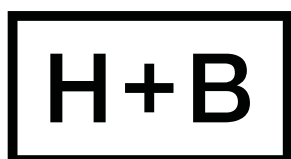
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Pro and con: Measure P, Menlo Park's downtown parking lot initiative

Should Menlo Park build housing on three of its eight city-owned downtown parking lots? For more than a year, that's the question that has sparked a spirited debate among residents, mobilized its downtown business district and

launched a ballot initiative: Measure P in the Nov. 3 general election. The Almanac invited members of Save Downtown Menlo, the group backing Measure P, and the No on Measure P campaign to make their cases to our readers.

Pro: Measure P stands for Menlo Park

By Van Kouzoujian

GUEST OPINION

For more than four decades, I have been proud to call Menlo Park home. One of the things that has always distinguished our community is the commitment of residents, merchants and property owners who care deeply about keeping our downtown welcoming, accessible, and economically vibrant.

Measure P is a reflection of that commitment.

As a member of the Yes on P campaign, I've been part of discussions about what "P" should stand for: Parking? Protection? People?

But it takes more than one word to say what Measure P stands for. It takes two.

Measure P stands for Menlo Park. It's about our downtown, and it's about finding ways to meet our housing goals that bolster our community rather than undermine it. Measure P allows us to make a once-in-a-generation decision together as a community, rather than leaving it to City Council members who typically serve just one or two terms.

Menlo Park has demonstrated its commitment to housing. Since 2010, we've added more than 1,400 homes — an 11% increase in our housing stock, outpacing the countywide growth of 8%.

And we're continuing that trend, especially near downtown. The city's July 2026 Housing Update shows that developers are proposing roughly 1,750 homes on the former SRI and USGS sites — about 1,250 more than were anticipated when the Housing Element was prepared. This new housing would be spread over roughly 80 acres, near transit, Burgess Park, the library and downtown.

So is it really necessary to squeeze high-rises onto the downtown plazas — especially when the developers' proposals have shown major funding gaps for replacing the lost public parking, while providing very limited parking for the new residents?

Using the downtown plazas for housing was not a requirement — it was a choice. We can correct course by amending our Housing Element, as San Mateo recently did. In fact, City Council candidate Laura Melahn has

already drafted an amendment which demonstrates how Menlo Park can meet its housing goals without relying on the downtown plazas.

Measure P gives the people of Menlo Park a choice.

So, what exactly does Measure P do?

Measure P would require voter approval before the city can sell, lease, convey, designate as surplus, or permanently change the use of any of eight downtown parking plazas in a way that diminishes parking availability, access or convenience. It does not prohibit development — but if the city wants to change the use of the plazas which have served us for generations, we get to vote on it.

Equally important is what Measure P does not do. Contrary to what you may have heard, it does not require a vote for maintenance or parking-related improvements like EV chargers or even a parking structure.

Nor does it apply anywhere other than the eight downtown plazas — a mere 9 acres of public land in the middle of our town. Nothing could be more local than Measure P. Yet outside politicians and interest groups are coming out to oppose it. This saddens me, because they neither understand our town, nor are they looking out for it. Other agendas seem to be at play.

Those of us who live in Menlo Park can see that our downtown is in a full-swing recovery, with lots of people shopping and strolling, and with vacancies being quickly filled since Santa Cruz Avenue was opened to more types of businesses in July. But we also know that small businesses would not survive five years of the downtown being a high-rise construction zone. Council's reckless plan would devastate the downtown that we all share and love, just as it was coming to life.

That is why I support Measure P. Our downtown is for all of us — and we should all have a say. Vote Yes on Measure P. ■

Van Kouzoujian is a Menlo Park resident, a graduate of Menlo-Atherton High School and USC, works in high tech, and is a co-proponent of Measure P.

Con: Preserve local control over housing

By Lucia Tedesco, Tom Enger, Leigh Flesher and Carol Orton

GUEST OPINION

The League of Women Voters of South San Mateo County (LWVSSMC) opposes Measure P on the November ballot for voters in Menlo Park. The League, a nonpartisan organization dedicated to informed civic participation and sound public policy, has carefully analyzed this "Downtown Parking Plazas Ordinance." Our conclusion: Measure P would harm our community in multiple critical ways.

First, it jeopardizes state compliance. Since 2022, the City of Menlo Park has engaged in complex discussions with the California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD) to certify Menlo Park's 2023-2031 Housing Element, which requires 1,662 new affordable units. The city considered every city-owned site for its potential to develop affordable housing, and the parking plazas were central to this certification.

If Measure P becomes law, it would effectively block the production of affordable housing and replacement parking on the downtown parking lots and could cause HCD to decertify the city's Housing Element. (Los Altos has an almost identical ordinance on its November ballot and has already received notice from HCD that its Housing Element is under review as a result of the proposed measure.) Decertification could trigger state penalties, loss of funding and more "builder's remedy" projects that bypass local control entirely, such as the high-rises proposed for 80 Willow Road (the former Sunset Magazine campus), which were submitted during an earlier period when the city did not have a certified Housing Element.

Second, it undermines democratic, representative governance. Measure P replaces transparent decision-making — informed by public input, expert consultants and professional city staff — with a rigid ordinance that handcuffs future officials and residents from adapting to changing needs.

The League supports representative government because it enables the complex, technical decision-making required for effective housing policy. Our City Council is supported by housing experts, financial consultants and legal counsel. They study engineering requirements, evaluate environmental impacts, assess traffic patterns, review financing

structures and balance competing community needs through public hearings where all residents can participate.

Development decisions cannot be responsibly reduced to yes/no ballot votes decided by campaign slogans. Our elected officials can be voted out if constituents disagree with their actions — but they must be empowered to make informed decisions about housing production in the meantime.

Third, the legal defense provisions in Measure P exemplify bad governance that could create a fiscal nightmare. Measure P requires the city to defend the ordinance against legal challenges at taxpayer expense. If the city declines to defend or appeal, three unelected proponents, Alexander John Beltramo, Caitlin Ann Darke and Van Richard Kouzoujian — not voters, not the City Council — are authorized to incur legal fees "as agents of the people" with no accountability, no guardrails and no requirement that the defense has merit. This provision creates an opportunity for ongoing litigation that could cost Menlo Park taxpayers millions of dollars.

Finally, it blocks affordable housing and replacement parking. Measure P would indefinitely prevent construction of affordable homes on this city-owned land near transit, parks and shops — precisely where housing is most needed and sustainable. The most immediate and damaging consequence of Measure P is simple: It would block or significantly delay the construction of at least 345 badly needed affordable homes planned for three downtown parking plazas. The city's plans call for replacing 100% of the current parking plus developing additional parking for these critically needed homes.

Measure P would require voter approval in a general election before any changes can be made to downtown parking lots, adding months or years of delay to projects already in the pipeline. Worse, the ordinance would effectively freeze our downtown parking lots in their current 1940s-1950s form indefinitely, preserving asphalt over housing our community desperately needs. Measure P would also prevent any material changes to use of the parking lots without a vote in a general election.

See **NO ON P**, page 19

Build new housing on a foundation, not wishful thinking

By Henry Riggs

Let me share an idea. What if Menlo Park commits to building replacement public parking downtown for its hoped-for housing projects first, before the new towers?

In fact, let's build some of the 1,000 new spaces that our consultants told us we needed for downtown vitality, but obviously never built. Yes, that's in the 2012 Specific Plan. And let's build it with real money, not good intentions or taxes. Then, as paving demolition begins on the three housing sites — if that's still the best option — we have the parking our community needs not only to survive, but to finally allow the action on Santa Cruz we've been endlessly talking about.

It's worth knowing the background. After years of decay, Menlo Park looked pretty sad in 2008. Dark storefronts (and five second-hand stores) in our downtown. So the city embarked on a visioning exercise, holding extensive public meetings, led by consulting architects and planners hoping to guide us to a village consensus. The result was an inspiring Vision Plan, ultimately developed into the El Camino/Downtown Specific Plan of 2012. We would have taller, denser buildings on El Camino (so far we have Springline and Middle Plaza projects, with 400 new homes) and an envisioned rebuilding of Santa Cruz Avenue to at least

two stories. Except the Santa Cruz rebuild never happened.

The key to what never happened is not shocking: It depended on the City Council funding retail parking structures that would absorb the hoped for new downtown customers — an estimated 1,000 spaces among three lots, with new building projects that would pay into the fund to pay for them. (Like any town, our zoning requires adequate parking for new construction.) But the City Council never quite did that. In fact, past councils never quite did anything downtown except to close two streets to cars during COVID-19.

The Specific Plan, which included a great deal of public engagement, proposed a plan that actually would support businesses by making parking available. But this City Council's current intent does the exact opposite — just look at the list of supporters behind Measure P. This is what happens when a small ideological group steers the council, overriding the process that had engaged the whole affected community.

It seems the business needs of our downtown are invisible to our current City Council members and their commission appointees. But they know that neighboring towns were struggling to build enough housing. (Not Menlo Park — we are actually ahead of state-required goals. That's good, we're thinking ahead.) So they proposed their vision of low-cost housing on

GUEST OPINION

those same three parking lots — lots they now want to designate “surplus land” — which have long provided customer and employee parking for our downtown. That includes parking for our restaurants, toy store, hardware store, paint store, optical shops, and all those second-hand stores, too, and the people that work there. Holding tight to a vision of low-income housing downtown, the council was reminded again and again by residents that we actually use that public parking! So on Sept. 15, 2025, they added it to a housing RFP to see how builders would respond to, essentially, a gift of land to build on.

And yes, they got three bids to build the housing — except not the retail parking. The developers sidestepped it. Maybe that's because they realized they would be spending \$50-100,000 per space and that made the “free” land less profitable.

As recently as last Tuesday night, Sept. 29, the City Council said we don't need to revisit alternative sites, we're close enough, let's sign a deal! As if we can figure out the parking — 556 spaces — sometime later. Really? People will just go somewhere easier to park. When parking for our destination stores is not convenient, the other stores will dry up too. Picture the blank paper taped in storefronts you used to visit.

As an architect and four-term planning commissioner, I can suggest good processes. But council members must know something, too. Like that a functional plan for replacement parking in the business district comes before rezoning those parking lots for housing. Oh, and the state isn't going to accept a smoke-and-mirrors “housing plan” either. All of what the Council majority doesn't seem to know worries me — and should worry you.

That's why we cannot rush ahead with any of the three proposals the city has obtained. As a community, we want to have low-cost housing built — your Measure P advocates at Save Downtown Menlo want that too. But we're not going to watch this Council give away building rights to developers who can't even respond to an RFP without copping out on our community parking. We can do better.

So trust yourselves to preview a zealous give-away before they bulldoze those lots. That's all that it's about. Vote for Measure P so you get a say. ■

Local architect Henry Riggs served four terms on the Menlo Park Planning Commission, including the entire development period of the Downtown Specific Plan. He has co-chaired two successful city initiatives; his downtown design includes the two-story Tibetan Carpet building on Santa Cruz Avenue.

LETTERS

Our readers write

It's all about the parking garage

Editor,

I have received quite a few questions from residents asking why I have stayed neutral and haven't joined other elected officials in endorsing “No on Measure P.” The answer is, frankly, that it's all about the parking structure, or lack thereof. Back when I was on the Menlo Park City Council, I said if the city was ever going to build on these lots, it was going to have to make a financial commitment to building a parking structure.

I haven't seen the city of Menlo Park make a financial

commitment yet, to fund a parking structure in a way that downtown merchants can rely on. It's reasonable to me, that if the city is going to take away so much parking to build housing, it has an obligation to put forward a solid plan with a funding commitment to build a parking structure. Parking structures don't get built on best intentions. Kudos to Drew Combs who recently stated as much at the last City Council meeting.

Without such a plan, Measure P is a decision best left to voters. Menlo Park voters are smart and they don't need me or any other endorser to tell them how to answer this question based on their own personal preference: Do you agree with the small business owners and think the city should have a firm plan and funding for a downtown parking garage to replace the parking lots taken for

an affordable housing project, or do folks agree with the city that it should prioritize affordable housing due to need and build on the parking lots downtown, trusting that a plan and funding for a parking structure will materialize later.

Personally, I think the city better put together a plan for a

parking structure urgently, or risk the measure passing. As an aside, I would also put a two-screen movie theater, like you see at ski resorts, in the sublevel of the parking structure that the city owned and could treat as a community benefit and lease out to an operator at a reduced rate to attract residents to the

downtown. That would make everyone happy. But a solid plan to build and fund any garage is necessary here. I doubt there would have been a Measure P at all if the parking structure had existed to begin with.

*Ray Mueller
Former Menlo Park mayor, San Mateo County supervisor*

NO ON P

continued from page 18

LWVSSMC isn't alone in opposing Measure P. Over 50 current and former local officials (including U.S. Congressmembers Sam Luccardo and Kevin Mullin, California State Sen. Josh Becker and State Assemblymember Marc Berman), and scores of community members, organizations and businesses share our concerns.

We need good governance and fiscal responsibility. We need

more affordable housing, not less. We need to maintain local control over housing, not risk builder's remedy developments citywide. We need to empower our elected officials to lead, not tie their hands indefinitely.

We need to vote no on Measure P. ■

Lucia Tedesco is the president of the League of Women Voters of South San Mateo County and Tom Enger, Leigh Flesher and Carol Orton are board members.

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In the spotlight

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COUNT ON HIM

Illusionist Jim Steinmeyer brings magic to TheatreWorks' 'Dracula'

Courtesy Tracy Martin Photography
Lucy (Emily Newsome) falls under the spell of Dracula (Scott Coopwood) in TheatreWorks Silicon Valley's "Dracula."

By Heather Zimmerman

For all the forms he has taken and all of the metaphors he stands in for, the world's most famous vampire is, at his core, pure theater. Though Dracula himself is furtive and shadowy, the story of the dark chaos he brings to Victorian London is full of high drama and action.

That's what makes it such a good fit for the stage, especially at this time of year, said TheatreWorks Silicon Valley Artistic Director Giovanna Sardelli, who is directing the company's production of "Dracula," which runs through Nov. 1 at the Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts.

"It has everything. There's romance, there's humor, there's theatrical magic, and (there's) just enough spooky

haunted-house fun, and just a hint of gore, to be so perfect for Halloween. It's so much fun in the theater. I wanted to do it for that reason for so long. It's just a really good story. There's a reason it's lasted for so long," Sardelli said.

The company is staging Steven Dietz's 1996 adaptation of Stoker's novel, which hews more closely to the original tale than many other versions have, Sardelli said.

Fittingly for such a theatrical show, Sardelli drew on her magical past — her time early in her career as a magician's assistant in Las Vegas. She learned skills that she uses all the time in directing, she said.

"A lot of that is just focus. 'Where do you want an audience to look? And how quickly do you need them to look in one place? How are you

drawing their eye, telling them to follow a story?'"

But for "Dracula," Sardelli added some magic to the production, enlisting illusion designer Jim Steinmeyer to bring an otherworldly element to the count and his world.

Steinmeyer began his career as an illusion designer for magician Doug Henning, and has also created work for Siegfried and Roy, Harry Blackstone, Jr., Ricky Jay and Orson Welles. He designed the disappearance of the Statue of Liberty, later purchased by magician David Copperfield and performed on TV in 1984. He's created illusions for Broadway shows, including most recently "Beauty and the Beast."

As dramatic as "Dracula" is, the illusions aren't so much about spectacle

as about using sleight of hand and other techniques to enhance the character and the story's supernatural qualities.

"The magic isn't production stage magic, the way you would see it in a magic show. It's really kind of subtle pieces that are all about circling his powers as a vampire," Steinmeyer said. "A lot of it is about portraying him in a certain way — his entrances and exits, and how they're dealing with these difficult subjects, like the blood transfusions and the madness of Renfield, who's attacking small animals and feels obsessed with that and how that's driving him insane. We use effects through that in subtle ways to tell those stories."

See **COUNT**, page 21

‘Heathens’ chronicles five people challenging their fundamentalist upbringings

The documentary makes its world premiere this month at the United Nations Association Film Festival

By Heather Zimmerman

Conventional wisdom holds that religion is among the trinity of topics, along with sex and politics, not meant for polite conversation. But having hard conversations about religion needs to happen, say the filmmakers behind “Heathens,” a documentary making its world premiere Oct. 24 at the United Nations Association Film Festival.

Talking openly was a game changer for five “heathens” profiled in the documentary by filmmakers David Cowan and Shawn Hardin, whose Pale Blue Dot Films is based in Redwood City.

The film follows a quintet of people from Christian fundamentalist families who met at a retreat for people who feel they must conceal that they are now questioning or rejecting that faith. The documentary chronicles their support for each other as they tell friends and family about their changed beliefs.

The filmmakers highlight a 2024 study from Cornell University indicating that one in three Americans — or about 80 million people — hides their religious disbelief, fearing repercussions from loved ones and communities.

Cowan and Hardin each come from tech and entrepreneurial backgrounds. The film continues the humanist work that Cowan and Hardin have focused on in filmmaking and other projects. Among Cowan’s other films is “Afghan Dreamers,” a documentary about a girls’ robotics team in Afghanistan. Hardin has founded OnlySky Media, a digital magazine and online platform for religiously unaffiliated Americans.

Being open about religious disbelief as a path to changing minds is something that the filmmakers liken to the approach that helped some members of the LGBTQ+ community make political and

cultural inroads — pointing out that everyone should be able to live their own lives and be open about who they are.

With “Heathens,” the filmmakers aim to start not only a conversation, but invite people to become part of a larger community through heathens.community, a website that features the film, but also resources and information.

We spoke to Cowan and Hardin ahead of their film’s premiere at UNAFF. This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

The Almanac: How did “Heathens” come about?

Cowan: I come from a fundamentalist religious background. I grew up in it, and so I experienced the journey of what it’s like to be in the fold, in a strong faith like that, to then lose your faith and then rebuild your beliefs and your values and your understanding of what’s real and not, what’s right and wrong.

So I feel like I have a perspective that other secular people maybe don’t have about some of the challenges of living in these communities and some of the challenges that these communities face to those of us outside them.

Some of the philanthropic work that I’ve done over the years has centered around this notion of promoting scientific method and critical thinking to help people who were in the position I was in. For example, I am a trustee of the Center for Inquiry and the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Science and Reason. We do all kinds of great work in the courts for separation of church and state, and in schools and in all kinds of different venues.

People will default to what’s emotionally comfortable to them, which is what the people around them believe. The only way to change somebody’s mind is to make them uncomfortable with those beliefs.

The Almanac: You talk about

how people are motivated to keep this hidden. How did you find people who are willing to talk about this on camera?

Cowan: So if somebody is dealing with this kind of thing and they can’t talk to anybody, one of the things they do is they go on the internet and they go in forums and they talk to people out there in the world to say, “Hey, is there anybody else like me?” What’s so surprising is that the subjects that we met through this movie — they all thought there was something wrong with them and that there weren’t other people like them. But still, they looked.

All these people in the beginning, when we talked to them, they all said, “Well, you can’t show my face on film. I can’t do that.” But once they started talking to us, and they realized, “You’re telling me you’re going to make a film about people like me, and my story might help other people?”

All our subjects said, “Count me in. I’ll be part of it.” For all of them, it meant coming out to the world in a way they hadn’t before.

The Almanac: What has been the reaction to the film so far?

Hardin: We have had some private screenings. We had one just about two months ago in upstate New York and at that event we did a panel discussion. One of the people in the open mic at the end said that we hadn’t just made a film about the five participants who are the stars of the film, but rather he felt it was a film about his life, and he actually turned around and asked the audience if anyone else in the audience felt the same way, and about a third of the audience raised their hands.

That was very meaningful to David and myself because, this is the San Francisco Bay Area, right? One of the most progressive areas in the United States. David and I really wanted to take a look at rural and small-town America,



Courtesy Pale Blue Dot Films

In the documentary “Heathens,” Southern Baptist pastor Allen talks about becoming an atheist.

that space still in America today is primarily mainstream Protestant evangelical Christianity, and that’s where really all of the heroes in our film came from. Many people who are outside of these progressive bubbles that we live in could identify with that, with the journey that our heroes share in this film.

Cowan: We hope that there’s going to be another big segment of America that sees this, which we haven’t screened to yet, but we hope to, which is the faithful communities in that part of America, because we really believe that we made a film that respects them. It’s not an attack on religion. It’s not an attack on them. It is more of an appeal to them to say: “These are loved ones in your family, in your community. This is what they’re thinking inside. This is what they’re struggling with. How would Jesus treat these heathens? How are you going to treat these heathens?” And try to ask them that question, and challenge them, make them uncomfortable with the idea that heathens have no place in their lives.

Hardin: We want this to be really, really clear. “Heathens” is

fully pro-pluralism. Our film, I think, represents the idea of really anyone’s religious expression as a personal choice is very important, but we also believe that state-sanctioned religious privilege is toxic. We reject the premise that religiosity confers any greater moral legitimacy, patriotism, or qualification for citizenship, and we think that’s really poisonous right now in the current political culture.

Heathens screens Oct. 24, 3:30 p.m., at the Mitchell Park Community Center, Palo Alto, followed by a panel discussion. ■

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Heathens is one of 60 films from around the globe focusing on human rights that will show at the United Nations Association Film Festival, taking place Oct. 15-25 in Palo Alto, Stanford University, East Palo Alto and San Francisco. The festival opens Oct. 15 with a screening in Palo Alto. For a full schedule, visit unaff.org/2026/schedule.html.

COUNT

continued from page 20

Developing the magic of “Dracula” has been a team project, Steinmeyer said.

“A good performer will give you a sense of what they think they can do well, and how that would work for them. So it was a collaborative effort, starting with Giovanna, saying, ‘Here’s how I picture this, and here’s what I’d like to see,’ and then us figuring out whether we play it up as a dramatic moment or whether

it’s something that just surprises the characters on stage. The nice thing about ‘Dracula’ is it has room for all of those,” he said.

With Steinmeyer, the production not only gained an experienced illusionist, but one who has written a book about the title character.

His 2013 book, “Who Was Dracula? Bram Stoker’s Trail of Blood,” explores the influences that shaped how Stoker wrote the character, and how the stage played a role from the start.

“It was deliberately written as a theatrical vehicle for England’s

greatest actor, Henry Irving, who was Bram Stoker’s boss,” Steinmeyer said. “One of the first things Stoker did was arrange a copyright performance of it, protecting it as a copyrighted project for the theater, to try and impress Henry Irving with it, and it didn’t work. Irving wasn’t interested in that part, which was a huge tragic mistake on his part.”

Stoker published “Dracula” as a novel in 1897 but it wasn’t adapted for the stage for another couple decades, when it appeared on Broadway in 1926, in a

production that included magic.

“That was a very innovative show in terms of magicians working on Broadway shows, and it had a very famous effect in it — not a brilliant effect, but a very famous effect — with the trick cape. I’ll say that because we’re not doing it,” Steinmeyer said, noting that it became a signature trick for productions of “Dracula,” at least through the 1970s.

“It was just a brilliant, simple theatrical moment that took everybody by surprise and told the story. It was a really interesting

example to me of what’s needed for those sorts of moments on stage.” ■

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TheatreWorks Silicon Valley stages “Dracula,” Oct. 7-Nov. 1 at Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts, 500 Castro St., Mountain View; tickets are \$34-\$115; theatreworks.org/mainstage/dracula.

Food & Drink



A brewing business

Chris Horng, owner of de-tea, pours a sample of decaf tea for a customer at a pop-up at Fireside Books & More in Redwood City.



De-tea specializes in decaf tea, including this black osmanthus tea.

Peninsula resident creates decaffeinated tea company

Story by Karla Kane | Photos by Claire Haughey

Foster City resident Chris Horng loved almost everything about tea — the flavors, the aromas, the soothing ritual of enjoying a cup in a moment of relaxation. What didn't he love? "I'm super-sensitive to caffeine," he said.

So he founded de-tea, billed as "real tea for the end of the day," to offer fellow tea aficionados just what he was looking for — an authentic tea experience without the caffeine buzz.

The de-tea journey started about six years ago. Horng had once been an avid coffee drinker, until uncomfortable acid reflux made that unsustainable. At his wife's suggestion, he switched to tea in 2020.

That was easier on his stomach and nerves, but the caffeine in his preferred varieties still started to catch up with him, leaving him wired into the night. He loved the feeling of brewing and sipping a nice cup of tea, but he just wasn't sure it was worth the side effects.

He searched for decaffeinated teas (those made from varieties of the tea plant, rather than naturally decaffeinated herbal options) but wasn't satisfied with what he found at grocery stores. The mainstream brands he tried just didn't have the flavor and feel he craved. So, he decided to make his own.

"I'm originally from Taiwan. I grew up drinking quality tea. I was trying to find something



Decaf jasmine green tea from de-tea.



Chris Horng, owner of de-tea, talks with customers at a pop-up at Fireside Books & More in Redwood City.

higher quality, but decaf,” Horng said. “Decaf coffee is so common in the States,” he thought to himself. “Hey, maybe I can use the same process and make tea decaf.”

While he didn’t have a background in the food and beverage sector, he does have one in engineering, so he was up for doing a deep dive into research and experimentation. He spent the next year or two exploring ways to decaffeinate tea, settling on the supercritical CO2 method.

There are several decaffeination techniques out there, he explained, including using chemical solvents, but those come with environmental and/or flavor-impacting downsides, he said. The supercritical (a fluid state in which the CO2 acts as both liquid and gas) process flushes and draws out much of the caffeine from the tea leaves while leaving the taste and aroma intact. Caffeine is removed, but nothing artificial is added, he said.

According to de-tea’s website, the process gets a cup of

jasmine green tea, for example, down to 3-5 mg of caffeine per cup, compared to around 50-60 mg for a typical cup of caffeinated tea.

The company offers decaf teas in varieties including jasmine green tea (his current bestseller as well as his personal favorite, infused with real, high-quality fresh jasmine blossoms) and black with osmanthus, with decaf oolong and green launching soon; and ¼ caf teas in roasted oolong, osmanthus black and black.

“The biggest downside of decaf tea is the lack of flavor. Once you taste my tea, people typically cannot tell there is much difference; it’s still resembling the original tea that people drink,” he said. “That’s something I’m pretty proud of.”

He works directly with farmers in regions of Taiwan and China that specialize in these varieties. The decaf jasmine green tea is longjing, a pan-roasted variety also known in English as dragon well tea, from Hangzhou, China, and

scented by hand with night-harvested jasmine flowers.

The decaf oolong is sourced from Chaozhou, China. Horng said he is particularly proud of the way this decaffeinated tea keeps its “natural floral taste and aroma and a sweet balanced flavor,” offering another option “for people who want to drink tea at night.”

The decaf black tea with osmanthus is a cultivar from China’s Guangxi province that is naturally almost caffeine-free, according to the website, and with a taste less bitter than a black tea such as English breakfast, Horng said. Osmanthus flower, with its sweet and smooth flavor, is less known in the United States than Asia, but he said he’s been seeing it popping up in local boba shops lately.

“Not all the people are familiar with osmanthus, but people are getting into it,” he said.

The soon-to-be available decaf green tea (also of the dragon well variety but without the jasmine infusion) has a nuttier, grassy flavor that

might appeal to matcha fans, he said.

He also plans to launch a decaf Earl Grey tea, using an Indian black tea grown at 6,000 feet and infused with bergamot, he said.

Horng is currently exploring more tea options, including seeking suppliers to help him with teas made with dried fruit that can be brewed hot or cold, and creating his own take on genmaicha — the Japanese-style tea made with toasted rice.

The business uses biodegradable sachets made from corn fibers to avoid microplastics, and the boxes are made from recycled materials. The box and label packaging materials are designed and manufactured in Taiwan, the decaffeination process and sachet packaging happens in China, and Horng does the final boxing, labeling and packing from home.

The current line of teas can be ordered online and Horng also brings them to Bay Area pop-ups. They can also be found at a few retailers (with more

in the works), including multiple stores in San Francisco, Thistle and Tonic in Pacifica and Fireside Books & More in Redwood City. Reading and sipping a nice cup of tea, he said, are two activities that pair perfectly.

“I think people who read books do enjoy tea as well, so it’s going pretty well over there,” he said. ■

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More information is available at de-tea.com. Instagram: [@de_tea_com](https://www.instagram.com/de_tea_com).

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A sign advertising de-tea’s pop-up sits outside Fireside Books & More in Redwood City.



A sign for decaf oolong, black tea and jasmine tea at a de-tea pop-up.



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