

November 3, 2025

Mayor Combs and City Council Members,

I hear a recurring refrain from the Menlo Park City Council:

***You say we are not listening, but we are listening. However, our hands are tied.***

Specifically, in the August 26, 2025 meeting, councilmember Schmidt said:<sup>1</sup>

“Tonight, you know, I think is about making sure that people understand we are listening, we do understand what people are saying, but the frame that we’re operating under is a combination of city and state that has severe penalties if we decommit to that.” [Schmidt 8/26/25]

Mayor Combs also rebuffed the voters’ “you are not listening” concern. He pointed out that just because not all councilmembers agreed on the approach to delivering needed affordable housing does not mean that not all councilmembers are listening. [8/26/25]

OK, maybe. But still a lot of people feel that councilmembers – either collectively or individually – are not listening. In fact, more than 15% of registered Menlo Park voters recently signed a petition saying, essentially, “You are not listening so we are going to speak through our vote!”

I gave some thought to why, in the view of the City Council at least, voters do not recognize councilmembers’ listening skills. I came up with a couple of reasons – there could be more.

### **Councilmembers Are Listening to, but Not *Hearing*, Voters**

Letter-writer, after letter-writer, and speaker after speaker at City Council meetings have asked the council to answer just a few basic, but also critical, questions. To date there have been few, if any, answers. For instance:

- What will be the economic impact on the City if a large portion (25%?) of businesses fail or leave the downtown district due to disruption from 4+ years of construction? If not 25%, then what portion is likely fail / leave, and what portion would be of concern? Has anyone done an economic impact sensitivity analysis? **No.** As Mayor Combs put it in the March 3<sup>rd</sup> City Council meeting, “the riddle of how you don’t sort of strangle downtown in the process of a 4-year construction process has just not been answered by anyone.” [Combs 3/4/25]
- What if this project – noble in its intentions – is designed to fail. Designed to fail, not on purpose necessarily, but due to an almost willful blindness? For instance, two of the builders the council asked to respond to the Request for Proposal [“RFP”] [Eden and Related] stated flat out that affordable housing funds cannot be used to build public parking. Has anyone asked legal counsel to confirm or refute this? **No.**
- What about parking? Throughout this discussion, voters have expressed concerns about the availability of parking to support the downtown businesses – both during construction and after the project is complete. These businesses draw customers from across all of

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<sup>1</sup> I apologize in advance for the extensive use of Councilmember quotations. I know this can be tedious and. Perhaps, pedantic. However, I thought it was important to make clear that regardless of whether City Council is listening to voters, we are listening to you.

Menlo Park (17.4 mi<sup>2</sup>) as well as from Atherton, Palo Alto, Redwood City, Portola Valley, Woodside, and other areas. As can be seen by the utilization of the current available parking, a lot of customers drive cars.

At the Request for Qualification [“RFQ”] stage, City Council asked builders to describe how they would retain or replace 90% of the parking spaces in the three downtown parking plazas.<sup>2</sup> AFTER the RFQ stage, City Council *increased* the public parking requirement to replacement of 100% of the current 556 spaces. However, as the City Council reviewed the RFP language, the Council decided to remove the requirement to provide any public parking and to make replacement of parking just a “priority.” **What?**

### **Councilmembers Are Listening but Only Hearing What They Want to Hear**

Time after time, councilmembers asked questions or “collected” facts but only heard what they want to hear. This is beyond confirmation bias. This is willful deafness. For example:

- In the June 3rd meeting, Councilmember Schmidt asked all of City Staff:  
“If we were to all of a sudden say ‘We do not want to proceed. We need to stop this. The residents are overwhelmingly telling us “No, this is not what we want.”’ Could you just remind us what the implications of a decision like that look like?” [Schmidt 6/3/25]

The City Attorney responded:

“I think there [are] various options that the City could pursue. There is not a singular path. We would likely start with a recommendation that the Council reconsider some of the deadlines and time commitments in the housing element program, HG4” [City Attorney 6/3/25]

OK. That does not seem to be the answer regarding catastrophic consequences that Councilmember Schmidt was fishing for, therefore he ignored it as did the rest of the Council.

- In the August 26th meeting, Mayor Combs reiterated that the downtown parking sites were not “an option of last resort.” They were chosen *over a number of other possible sites*.

Still, Councilmember Schmidt felt it necessary to prove to voters that many alternatives had been considered *and rejected*, and that the downtown parking plazas were the only viable option.

“You know there’s a myth that we are not looking at alternative sites. And that myth is not true. I spent a lot of time thinking about the Civic Center. There was a session to explore that and kind of understand the rationale, because it happened before I joined. So, you know I also know that there have been other sites that are identified that maybe are either viable or not viable for various reasons, but the idea that we’re not looking at alternative sites is, is just not true. So, I would love to hear from staff to see what they think.” [Schmidt 8/26/25]

Staff then explained why “other sites” were not chosen. According to the explanation provided by Staff, those decisions were based on a range of inconsistent criteria and inaccurate assumptions. Also, some sites were rejected but the analysis whether they could be used was not actually completed.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that two of the builders selected for the RFP stage (MidPen and PATH Ventures) provided no details about the units, dwelling types or resident parking.

<sup>3</sup> Again, the Mayor indicated that City Council PREFERRED the downtown parking plaza to other possible sites. It was not that there were no other viable sites that “forced the selection” of the parking plazas.

Rather than recognize that the selection process was fraught with inconsistencies and, in some cases, glaringly insufficient analysis, Councilmembers seemed to accept this explanation.

No one asked, “would your selection analysis be different if you knew that using the parking plazas risks severe negative economic impact on Menlo Park?”

Perhaps, no one asked that because there has been no economic impact analysis or perhaps because the Council is just not that interested considering alternatives.

To close out his point, Councilmember Schmidt said:

“Clearly, the City is not ignoring alternate sites. The, the analysis that they’ve done before, and the analysis that’s ongoing as we are faced with the numbers, I think that just shows that, that these are professionals who are looking across the city to figure out what our housing needs are going to be now and in the future.” [Schmidt 8/26/25]

Yes, I have heard that before. ***You, City Council, are listening. It is just that your hands are tied and there is no time to think of something better.***

I sincerely hope that you ARE listening and that you HEAR what voters are saying. I say this because I very much want to see Menlo Park build the affordable housing that it so desperately needs. I also want to see the City deliver on its priority for downtown vibrancy.

Right now, City Council has launched a project that appears to have a high risk of failure. How high? We do not know because Council has not asked for that analysis. Perhaps, as Mayor Combs pointed out, the marketplace will come back to City Council and say this project is not viable. These goals cannot be achieved. Then where will we be?

Multiple times, Council has been asked, and has asked itself, should we hit “pause” and re-examine this project? Each time the answer has been a resounding “No!”

However, if there is no time to pause and think about how to do this right, then there is certainly not enough time to do this wrong and have this project fail.

Menlo Park needs to understand the possibility of failure – project failure and business failure -- and prepare alternative approaches. To do otherwise is indeed willful blindness.

Sincerely,

Rob Foster