

Housing Santa Cruz County 2024 Candidate Questionnaire - Susie O'Hara

Most people in Santa Cruz say they are for affordable housing, but then they qualify it with not in my neighborhood. Since council seats are now by district what criteria would you apply to deciding whether to support a project located in your district?

In my mind, there is a three-step rubric to determine whether or not to support a project in District 5, or any district in the City. Step 1: Does the proposal meet regulatory requirements? Does it fit into the City's General Plan, as well as the zoning requirements present at the time the project is being considered? Step 2: Does the project meet the objective standards in place for that property and housing type? The Objective Standards were developed after extensive research and engagement with the community about their values and preferences, and the Standards are in place to ensure local control, high quality building design, community values, preserving/planting trees, improved open space amenities, and transparency. Step 3: Consider the project in the context of the recommended site and the neighborhood. As an example, District 5 has a rock quarry that currently has no buildings on it. If a proposal came up for a multifamily apartment complex at the quarry, I would probably not be in support of it, because it is over a half mile walk to the nearest bus stop, and in a deep residential area (not to mention is also in an area of sensitive geological and historical significance), so it would likely be cost prohibitive to add another bus stop near the housing complex. This type of development would increase the dependence of these potential residents on cars, which would in turn increase traffic in neighborhoods and our carbon footprint. Now, if this project was moved closer to a transit corridor, I would be much more supportive of that proposal.

I also want to acknowledge the elephant in District 5 - UCSC. 8 of the 10 UCSC Colleges are in District 5. The UC has stated that it intends to increase enrollment, but their planned on-campus housing developments do not keep pace with the enrollment increase. This will exacerbate the current housing crisis in our community unless we build more housing now. Unfortunately, this is a UC decision that the City has very little control over as they are ultimately a State institution. That being said, it is important to keep lines of communication open between the City and the UC, so that impacts to our community (environmental impacts, water supply, bus lines) can be mitigated and planned for to the best of our abilities. We also have a role in advocating for on campus housing and pushing, as the City has been, the university to develop housing on campus and ensure access to housing for students to the highest extent possible.

Can you name a specific location in your district that you feel would be a good site for a housing project?

There's tremendous opportunity in Harvey West for mixed-use developments. This area is currently zoned as "General Industrial," but with some changes to our zoning regulations, we could make some of those large parcels mixed use with a combination of business/industrial on the ground floor and housing above. Additionally, we should continue to capitalize upon this area's proximity to the wraparound services available at Housing Matters on Coral Street, by building additional extremely low-income housing nearby as well.

Are there policies that make it harder to build housing in your community that you would like to change?

Like I mentioned before, the zoning in Harvey West. Additionally, there are policies and practices that make it challenging to build housing. I recognize that a lot of changes have been made recently to the way ADUs and multi-family residences receive their permits, so I want to interview homeowners, contractors, and City staff to understand the bottlenecks in the process today that are preventing us from building residences faster. Knowing that meeting the requirements of the current Housing Element (which would bring at least 3,736 new housing units online) will still not be enough housing to meet expected demand (the population of the City of Santa Cruz is expected to grow by 10,800 residents by 2035), it is important to look at the current processes, gather data and feedback, and ensure continuous process improvement in order to build housing faster.

In the last five years have you attended a Planning Commission or City Council Meeting to support or oppose a housing project?

Not as a constituent, but I engaged deeply on housing development while employed by the City Manager's office.

Did you attend community meetings, participate in the surveys, or make comments on the City's Housing Element?

No.

What is your position and reasoning on the Housing for People initiative?

I do not support Measure M, the Housing for People ballot measure. We have a long history of putting initiatives on the ballot that stymie progress and confuse voters. I think this measure was promoted by a sector of the community that is really pro "no growth" and that isn't my position. If we stymie progress with the developments that are already in the pipeline and make it nearly impossible for other projects to come into the fold, it's going to both slow everything down and force a lot of development outside of the areas where high density development is most suitable. The state has said unequivocally that we have to build more housing, so if it's not going into taller buildings on transit corridors then it's going to have to go into residential neighborhoods.

Santa Cruz is the only jurisdiction in the area that met its RHNA numbers in the last cycle, and the only one to have acquired the ProHousing designation. What stands out to you in how that was accomplished that can be applied to the next cycle, and what additions to the new Housing Element do you feel will help the city meet its new RHNA numbers?

I think there were three major changes that allowed us to get to our ProHousing designation. First, the balance of public opinion shifted around the time the downtown library project was being voted on. The majority of Santa Cruzans seem to now recognize that the previous “no growth” approach to development was not serving our overall community well and was not setting us up for long-term success. Second, when the City returned to the Downtown Expansion Plan, it provided the permission structure for government, developers, businesses, and the community at large to dream big, and think about what a vibrant downtown would look like long into the future. The downtown plan provided a framework to think about where housing might go, what services those new residents would need within walking distance, as well as how our public spaces needed to evolve as we moved away from single-family homes as the default housing model. Developers are stepping in to fill the identified needs. Third, policy makers looked at the strategies the “no growth” proponents had used to block projects in the past and saw that previous projects were tied up in appeals, where decision makers seemed to perpetually move the goal post for approval. The Objective Standards came about as a way to coalesce community input and values and outline the types of development that would most likely be approved, and with clear guidelines now outlined, developers felt more empowered to present projects that may actually get approved and ultimately get built.

For the next Housing Element cycle, I think it’s going to be critical for the City to continue to provide this permission structure and framework to dream big. This can be accomplished by diving deep into our zoning regulations and kicking off similar “reimagining” projects to the Downtown Expansion Plan. Like I mentioned in question 3, we should listen to homeowners, renters, developers, contractors, housing agency and government staff to understand both what is working well in the current housing model, and also where improvements need to be made to streamline the process and remove bottlenecks. Government also has a responsibility to stay ahead of the curve, to ensure that infrastructure is ready by the time it’s needed for these new residences. That means shoring up our water supply, thinking about our transit corridors, expanding our refuse and recycling capacity, etc. It’s then up to City staff and the Council to update and amend our regulations and policies to ultimately remove those bottlenecks and adequately plan for our future.

Consultants, in a report to City Council, stated that a 100% affordable housing project usually needs to be at least 50 units, and depending on lot size would most likely be 5 stories. There is a general community push against anything over three stories. Would you support a 100% affordable housing project, with that criteria, if it was on a major transportation corridor?

If the project meets the three-step rubric I outlined in question 1 (Does the proposal meet regulatory requirements? Does the project meet the Objective Standards in place for that property and housing type? Does the project make sense in the context of the recommended site and the neighborhood?) then I would likely support this project.

100% affordable housing projects need to have the equivalent of free land. There are few sites the city owns that are large enough for an affordable housing project. One is the

existing library site. The city began the process of planning what could be built there and affordable housing was a common choice for those who participated in the survey. Would you support that site including affordable housing as a major component?

Assuming the project meets the three step requirements I mentioned in Question 1, yes. I'd like to keep the option available for a mixed use development with businesses, childcare, and services on the bottom floor and low-income residences above. There's a large number of residential units coming online downtown in 2024 and 2025, and I want to see what the community says we need to support all these new residents. With the downtown New Leaf moving to River Street, I suspect we'll need another grocery store in the downtown area, and the ground floor of the old library site seems like a logical location for it.

100% affordable housing projects have a better chance of acquiring funding if the city funds part of it, land is one of the ways, but also cash funding. The city's fund for that is nearly exhausted on current projects. What, if any, ways would you support to increase funding sources?

While our current funds are exhausted, we have had recent success with securing one-time funds from the state and federal government. Most notably, a \$14 million grant from the State and \$4.6 million from the American Recovery and Response Plan that came in in 2021 to fund housing and homelessness response. These funds became available because we have collaborative relationships with our state and federal representatives, and they advocated on our City's behalf. There may be more funding opportunities worth exploring at the state and federal levels, and it will take efforts from our non-profits, government organizations and elected officials to create a unified message and effort to secure these funds.

It's also worth exploring another bond measure, similar to the 2018 Santa Cruz County Affordable Housing Bond (Measure H). The 2018 measure failed to get the $\frac{2}{3}$ majority it needed countywide, so I would recommend restricting this to just the City of Santa Cruz. There seems to be more public support for affordable housing in the City than in the unincorporated areas of the county.

Do you have any ideas that would increase incentives for developers to build in Santa Cruz instead of somewhere else?

To be honest, this isn't my area of expertise. However, there are many people in our community who have ideas around incentives. We need to engage folks in the development community early and often about how to bring investment in, and marry their perspective with community members who are stakeholders in the outcomes. There is precedent here, as Bonnie Lipscomb (City Economic Development Director) has brought people in the hotel industry together with businesses that attract tourists to explore opportunities for increasing our Transit Occupancy Tax (tourism) revenue and the downstream impacts it may have within our community.

One of the new requirements in the Housing Element is Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing. The Peace Village project is an example of what can be done, having low-income housing in one of the most affluent neighborhoods. Another example is the Dream Inn project that would have lower income units in the coastal zone that also has been an exclusive neighborhood. Do you have any ideas of locations or ways to meet the Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing provisions?

The goal of Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing is a good one, and one that requires a deep look at where our housing currently exists and where it does not, what types and affordability levels of housing exist where, and what are the common race, ethnicity, age, disability and economic statuses of the residents. These are nuanced discussions that require a deep understanding of our neighborhoods and residents. The shift to district elections is an opportunity to have each council member take a hard look at these factors within their own district, have open and honest discussions with their constituents, and craft suggestions for where we can make adjustments to address, combat and relieve disparities to foster more inclusive communities.

Even though the county a few years ago, working with the Housing Authority, promoted landlords to consider Section-8 tenants there is still a long wait for housing units for those qualified. Do you have any ideas for incentivizing beyond what the program already provides, or any thoughts on how to encourage the program?

Communication between the Housing Authority and landlords about the incentives of accepting Section 8 vouchers has been inconsistent in the past. In reality, having a Section 8 designation carries a number of protections for landlords that I think many market-rate landlords would be envious of. We need to maintain consistent, holistic engagement with landlords so the benefits of accepting vouchers is top of mind when they are looking to fill a vacancy. Additionally, there is a stigma about who is on Section 8 vouchers. Some landlords have the perception that a Section 8 designation will get them someone who's coming straight from living off-the-grid in the Pogonip, mentally unstable and on drugs, when in reality the vast majority of our Housing Choice Voucher participants are employed, young families, who are essential members of our community just trying to make it in our high cost of living town. And further, most folks with Section 8 vouchers have case management services that provide stability, help in managing behavioral and physical health issues, and support around employment.

Housing the homeless has been and continues to be a significant challenge. Three projects are in the works, Jessie Street under construction (50 units), an expansion of the Coral Street Harvey West with 120 units and the Housing Authority's 20-unit project at Natural Bridges. Cities like San Jose are working on finding a location for and creating villages using tiny homes. What ideas do you have for housing the homeless -- supportive housing?

A recent new State law allows religious institutions in California to turn their parking lots and other properties into low-income housing, and bypass most local permitting and environmental

review rules. Locally, the Association of Faith Communities (AFC) has been advocating for partner churches to have tiny home villages in their parking lots. Unfortunately, AFC has not had good traction with the City and County to support the village concept. As I discussed previously, by working with state and federal officials to find one-time funds, and to create a more permanent funding source through a bond measure, I hope to be able to provide the resources needed to support these types of managed villages as we already have organizations willing to do the work, but they need help to support their operations.

At the end of the day, our goal is to put more and more homeless individuals on the path to housing. As that effort succeeds, we should see less money being spent on emergency shelters (the Armory, the Safe Parking Program, for example), and more in these types of supportive interim housing solutions where people can start to address their extenuating circumstances and wait for permanent homes to become available.

What do you feel voters should know about you to convince them you will be a strong advocate for housing/affordable housing?

My husband and I raised our three daughters in Santa Cruz, without extended family support, then on a single educators' salary. It was hard to afford to live here then, and it has only gotten less affordable since, especially for young adults who are trying to start a life here. I want my daughters to feel like Santa Cruz is a place that they can come home to after college, not have to live with Mom and Dad, have a fulfilling career, meet a partner, live somewhere safe with enough space to enjoy their hobbies, and start a family if they so choose. All of those goals are made more difficult by our community not having enough housing. Selfishly, increasing our affordable housing supply gives me an opportunity to keep my daughters close by, but it also creates opportunities for thousands of other residents in similar life stages to them. Building more housing – from extremely low income to market rate, from ADUs to multifamily units – helps students, teachers, childcare workers, nurses, essential workers, young families, seniors, and businesses. It's the investment in our future that our community needs.