

City Council candidates face off in first forum, hot topics answered

By SARA HALL

Laguna Beach City Council candidates faced off in the first forum of the 2024 election season last week, answering questions on a number of hot topics including visitor impact, the Promenade on Forest, undergrounding utilities along Laguna Canyon Road, wildfire mitigation and parking structures.

The August 27 event was held in council chambers and hosted by Village Laguna with co-moderators Merrill Anderson and John Thomas. It was streamed live on Cox channel 852. A video of the forum is [posted on the Village Laguna website](#).

There are two council seats open and four candidates: Incumbents George Weiss and Bob Whalen, along with challengers Hallie Jones and Judie Mancuso. All four attended the forum.

Questions were contributed by Village Laguna members and others. The candidates were allowed three-minute opening and closing statements. For other questions, they were directed to give two-minute answers, with the exception of the “lightning round” that asked yes or no questions

The first question that all candidates answered with a two-minute answer was one on the minds of a lot of Laguna Beach residents: The city is at a breaking point with millions of visitors every year creating traffic congestion, extra trash, compromising safety and lowering the quality of life for many locals. The candidates shared some ideas to better manage tourism.

“There are a number of things we can do and should do,” Whalen said.

They could try some more creative ideas down the road, he noted.

He suggested possibly taking a look at congestion pricing, although that might take a change in legislation, and that would entail charging a fee to come into town on certain days. They could also look at increasing parking rates, an effort he led the charge of several years ago to the CCC. They could also add more parking meters around town to increase revenues to devote back to visitor management. There are also some simple ideas that could make a difference, like building public bathrooms in South Laguna.

They heard some good suggestions from residents at the recent town hall meeting, including better enforcement of the current parking laws and beach rules.

That will cost money, Whalen added, which is one of the reasons he supported bringing the [business license tax](#) to the ballot.

“It’s going to take a variety of things to do to find solutions, but I think they’re out there,” Whalen said.

There are a number of possible solutions, Weiss agreed, including congestion pricing, which is something he’s previously mentioned. There are cities around the world that implement that type of system to keep vehicles out of town, he added.

“The solution is limiting the number of cars,” he said. “No amount of enforcement is going to stop people from coming into town.”

There have to be incentives for people to park outside of town, he suggested at Act V and ride a bus in, Weiss said. There could also be a similar plan for workers, he added.

Weiss also suggested they need to find a way to tax day-trip tourists. They missed out on an opportunity on that, he said, likely referring to the business license tax discussion. He opined that a majority of the council is business first, not residents first.

It's also about education, Jones added.

"It's not enough for us to talk to our visitors about how lovely this place is and how much they should want to protect it, right? They also need to be educated on the consequences of not doing so," she said.

Visitors need to be informed about the regulations in place and the enforcement that will occur if they violate these rules. They also need to look at potentially increasing penalties.

"I think we all agree that this summer we've had more visitorship, more traffic, than I've certainly seen in my lifetime," Jones said.

First and foremost, they need to get people out of their cars, she said, and that can be done through peripheral parking and building parking structures on the outskirts so that people can walk to public transit in order to navigate around town. The congestion caused by cars is incredibly problematic, she added.

They also need to figure out how to balance coastal commission mandates for coastal access with resource protection, Jones added, because right now it's not a good balance.

Mancuso said when she ran for City Council in 2016 what was happening at that time is exactly what's going on now. They talked about a lot of potential solutions eight years ago, but they were never completed. For example, a parking structure at the outskirts of town and electric vehicles to shuttle people in.

She also suggested returning to the California Coastal Commission to make a case for changes.

The Promenade on Forest and whether or not it should be permanent was another hot topic at the forum

Regarding the Promenade on Forest – whether or not it should be permanent, the impact on local businesses and potential alternatives like a split street model – the candidates again had differing opinions.

Council created the Promenade in 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. On Jan. 12, 2021, councilmembers voted [unanimously to extend the outdoor dining](#) and retail display temporary use permit program, including the Promenade on Forest, and directed staff to solicit proposals for analysis, design and entitlement for the conversion to a permanent plaza.

In May 2021, the city contracted with RRM Design for services to make the Promenade on Forest a permanent installation. The [program plan was approved by council](#) on June 7, 2022, which acted as a guide to develop the design concepts.

The Planning Commission reviewed concepts for the Promenade on Forest on July 5, 2023, and, after nearly three hours of discussion, [commissioners unanimously agreed to recommend](#) the more informal, meandering style "Forest stroll" design.

Both designs with the PC's suggestion were forwarded to council in January, and ultimately [council unanimously paused the process](#) to further study constraints and gather more information.

They've got a good process underway for the Promenade, Whalen said, which includes a task force with Mayor Sue Kempf and Councilmember Mark Orgill and about a dozen community members, and a group of local architects looking at alternatives.

"I think they'll come back with some good options for us," Whalen said.

Generally, he leans toward a complete closure of the road, but he's open to looking at other ideas, he added.

They've also done a lot to replace the parking that has been removed from Forest Avenue, Whalen said, including adding spots at nearby locations.

"I don't think parking's really the issue," he said.

When he walks Downtown, particularly in the evenings, sometimes the Promenade is the only place of life in the entire Downtown, Whalen said. It brings a vibrancy to the space, he added.

They need to work with the merchants to come up with the best approach, Whalen said. Jones agreed they should collaborate and consider the local businesses.

"The people whose livelihoods are being impacted by what we do on the Promenade need to be a part of that conversation," she said.

The design also needs to be resident driven, she commented, they shouldn't have an outside consultant decide what they want to see for the community.

"We need to be moving towards a more pedestrian-friendly community and getting people out of cars," Jones said. "I think the Promenade moves us in that direction."

If, as a community, they decide to make the Promenade permanent, it needs to be done in a way that protects those large trees, she added.

"There's absolutely no reason we can't save those trees and we should," Jones said.

Coming out of COVID, Mancuso understood why it was allowed and thought there would be a natural progression to use the space on weekends, possibly for the farmers' market. That was the time to have the discussion to see what worked for everyone, she added.

"There has been this inequity, this imbalance, that the restaurants gained and all the other stores were losers," she said. "That's been a real issue."

She frequently parked on Forest Avenue in the past, Mancuso noted, and she has also now used the Promenade.

The funds that the city has already put into the project is enough and she does not support spending any more money on the Promenade, she concluded.

Weiss was the strongest voice against the idea.

"I'll be honest, I think the project's been a disaster so far," Weiss said.

Residents weren't consulted when it started during the pandemic, he noted. While the businesses were consulted, some of the retail stores have since questioned whether or not it's valuable to them, Weiss added.

He read a letter submitted by a resident to council in January, in which the author David Shroeder wrote that Forest Avenue as it existed before COVID was a unique historical treasure that is worth preserving as it was.

"We can have a Promenade and we can have a historic district just by creating a hybrid solution," Weiss commented. "It's a simple solution."

It could serve as a street during the week and then turn into a Promenade on weekends, Weiss suggested.

The Promenade has already cost the city a lot of money, he said. It's a "foolhardy project" to make it permanent, Weiss commented, and reiterated his support of a hybrid model.

The city is looking into undergrounding utilities along Laguna Canyon Road and potentially taking over control of the road

On the topic of undergrounding utility lines along Laguna Canyon Road and potentially taking over control from Caltrans of the major throughfare, the council candidates had a variety of perspectives on the topic.

In May 2023, council unanimously approved a \$3.56 million [contract for preliminary engineering and environmental](#) documents for the Laguna Canyon Road improvements project. That will get the city through the environmental design phase, which they are in the middle of right now, Whalen said.

Following the environmental phase and spending the money council previously authorized for that work, they will find out what county, state and federal funds are available.

“We’ve had discussions with all of them. I’m confident we’ll get that funding in the end,” Whalen said.

Now, they are looking at getting it “shelf ready” to apply for grant funding, he said.

Whalen clarified that the \$12 million figure mentioned in the question (described as the annual spending amount) is a liability number that was mentioned in a report, but it’s not the operating cost.

“There’s a lot of misinformation out there about us buying the road or not buying the road,” he said.

If Caltrans relinquishes the road, the agency will either give it at no cost or provide some funds, Whalen added.

Most recently, councilmembers voted 4-0 (Mark Orgill was absent) on January 9 to [proceed with public engagement](#) for the project, move forward with submitting applications for various grants and submit a relinquishment initiation letter to Caltrans to enter negotiations for the acquisition of Laguna Canyon Road.

“This project is much more than a wildfire safety project,” Whalen said. “There’s a lot of benefits to this project.”

By getting the utilities underground, it creates the right of way that allows for bike lanes and pedestrian lanes, he noted. Also, in the event of an earthquake, utility poles could fall over onto the road and create issues with evacuation routes. There are also aesthetic reasons, he added.

Jones, who was a member of the Laguna Canyon Road Task Force back in 2015, said undergrounding is critical to protect the canyon from wildfire and also to preserve it as an important evacuation route.

As a city, they don’t want design control of big projects like this to be turned over to Caltrans. But, there’s a lot to consider in whether or not Laguna Beach needs to take over the road in order to do that, she added.

“We need people who are willing to sit down and negotiate – and negotiate hard – with Caltrans to get them to do the projects that they need to do in the way that we want to have them done,” Jones said. “Do we need to have ownership of the road in order to do that? I’m not sure about that. I think we need to look very, very closely at the financial and liability applications of doing so.”

Weiss said he’s generally for undergrounding, if they can find a way to pay for it, but it’s a \$150 million project. The funding has to be in place beforehand, he emphasized.

“It’s a once in a lifetime project,” he added. “These are big numbers and we have to take it seriously.”

Although he’s concerned about the cost and benefit analysis and what it comes out to in the long run.

There’s only been a few fires in the canyon over the past two decades, he pointed out, and he’s unsure if they were all caused by power poles. Both the risk and the expected benefits are low, Weiss commented.

Mancuso was the strongest voice opposing the idea.

“I’m against having the road relinquished to us because I don’t feel like it’s necessary,” Mancuso said. “It could put us in financial jeopardy.”

It’s time to drop this and move on, she said. They need to talk about safety, but undergrounding is a red herring, Mancuso commented.

When asked what can be done to minimize the risk of catastrophic loss of life and property in case of a wildfire, some of the candidates emphasized the work that has been

done in recent years and to continue with those efforts, although not everyone thought it has been enough.

Mancuso suggested looking at the city's water supply and working on a partnership with an agency to utilize recycled water.

There was a lot of talk about this when she ran in 2016 and they are still in the same situation as they were eight years ago, Mancuso said.

Although Whalen argued that it's unfair and incorrect to say the city is in the same spot as before. They've spent about \$23 million implementing a wildfire mitigation and safety plan, and worked on a number of mitigation efforts: Utilities have been undergrounded in key areas, fuel modification zones have been expanded, new helicopter refilling stations have been installed, and they've held forums and workshops to encourage the community to harden their homes and create a defensible space.

Jones, who said she was a student at Laguna Beach High School when the 1993 fire occurred, also emphasized what residents can do to make their homes and property more resilient and defensible.

"That's not going to prevent a wildfire, what it's going to do is buy us time. It's going to buy us time for firefighters to get in there and fight that fire," Jones said.

In her role at the Laguna Canyon Foundation, they partnered with the LB Fire Department to create what then-California Coastal Commission Executive Director Jack Ainsworth called "the [most sensibly designed fuel modification plan](#) that I've ever seen in the state" and recommended it be used as a model across California.

"I'm incredibly proud of that work and I'm proud of what the city has done to create defensible space around homes," Jones said.

She also suggested restoring those zones to native habitat, which is not as fire prone as some invasive species.

They've done pretty good with the fuel modification zones, Weiss commented, which weren't developed at the time of the 1993 fire.

"We were caught with our proverbial pants down and it turned into a disaster," he said.

He agreed with ideas to harden the home, but "certainly don't want to get rid of vegetation and put rocks in five feet around your house – that's not Laguna."

Weiss also suggested to stop building in the high severity fire zones and instead purchasing that property and keeping it as open space.

Candidates also shared their opinions on traffic issues and parking structures

Candidates were also asked about their stance on building parking structures in Laguna Beach.

Mancuso suggested a parking structure in Lot D, which was an idea she raised previously and hasn't happened. To keep the cars on the outskirts of town, she emphasized. Mancuso also called the fact that the trolley is free "absurd" and suggested they start considering charging for rides.

Whalen said the city doesn't need a lot of parking structures, but potentially supports the idea for one by city hall (which was included as an option in the [parking and transportation demand management report](#)) which could create a lot of opportunity for Downtown. A lot of workers could park there who currently park in the neighborhoods, he added. Parking further out and taking transportation in is a great idea, Whalen said, it just hasn't worked.

Jones also supported the idea of a parking structure by city hall, depending on what the final design and cost would look like. She also agreed that there doesn't need to be a significant amount of parking structures in town and reiterated that they need to move

toward a more pedestrian-friendly community. Jones also suggested exploring the idea for small “pocket” parking lots.

The parking management plan recommended looking at a number of different sites for possible structures, including locations that don’t seem appropriate, Weiss said. He would probably support one at Act V, where people could use public transportation into town. Bussing people into town could be done if there are incentives to do so, he added. He opposed any parking structures of any size in the city that would mostly benefit city employees, which would be the case for the location by city hall, and not for residents.

The city is working on better utilizing the Laguna Beach Community and Recreation Center (formerly St. Catherine of Siena School) through the facilities master plan, currently under development

Thomas posed an individual question to Whalen about the best [use of the LB Community and Recreation Center](#) (formerly St. Catherine of Siena School), saying it’s being underutilized two years after the [property was purchased](#) and asking him if the \$23 million price tag (a financing plan appropriated approximately \$12 million from various city funds and the remaining [\\$11.5 million through a loan](#)) was justified.

“It’s a tremendous asset for us long term,” Whalen answered, “but I am frustrated that we haven’t put it to better use yet.”

It’s currently being used for expanded recreation programs and some community use from nonprofits, he added, as well as the city’s emergency operations center. It does need to be deployed more fully, he noted, and in order to do that, more parking needs to be added. That could happen through negotiating a lease with the adjacent property or potentially constructing some on site, Whalen explained.

“That’s going to be part of the longer-term solution,” he said.

It’s now wrapped up in the city’s effort to develop a [facilities master plan](#), which is expected to return to council early next year. He’s looking forward to seeing what will be recommended.

Answering a separate question about his reasoning for challenging staff, Weiss said he asks questions because sometimes important information is missing from the reports. He’s been disappointed with the level of detail in staff reports over the past three and a half years, Weiss said. He oversees the work of city staff on behalf of the residents, he added, and he asks about things that people want to know.

“Otherwise, we get the proverbial wool pulled over our eyes and vote for things that we shouldn’t and that’s why I asked those questions,” Weiss said.

Replying to the second half of the question, he also noted that it might be helpful for staff to provide a “pros and cons” list without offering their expert recommendation.

Council is here to weigh the evidence on both sides of any issue, Weiss said. But when staff chimes in that a project or item might be a good idea, it can force agreement and take the decision-making process away from councilmembers, he added.

Mancuso, in another specific question for only her to answer, said the city needs to look at the budget and look for anything they can cut.

“We need better checks and balances,” she said.

Referencing the [council planning session](#) on January 19, Mancuso summarized then-interim City Manager Sean Joyce’s comments (which focused on potential areas for improvement and ways to address issues hindering operational efficiency) as the council “not living within your means.”

There are a number of capital projects already funded and underway, but the workshop also includes a long list of things (62 policy initiatives and larger projects) they want to accomplish, she noted.

In an individual question to Jones, regarding how she can get up to speed on the detailed functions that councilmembers must perform, she highlighted that she's worked adjacent to city government for more than a decade and has attended innumerable council meetings.

"Is there a learning curve for me? Absolutely. 100%," she said, "and I'm thrilled about it. I can't wait to sink my teeth into some of these issues."

The lightning rounds posed a variety of questions to the candidates

Some notable topics were tackled immediately in the first lightning round.

They were split on supporting the city building parking structures at taxpayer expense. Jones and Whalen answered yes, while Mancuso and Weiss said no.

All four candidates supported the idea of sidewalks on both sides of Coast Highway. If possible, Weiss added.

When asked if they believe that the costs the city incurs providing services to visitors exceeds revenue attributable to visitors by more than \$20 million a year, most of the candidates agreed with the statement. Mancuso and Weiss were confident about answering yes, while Whalen replied "probably." Jones said she couldn't answer without looking at methodology of the studies.

If they knew that 75% to 80% of the revenue of Laguna bars and restaurants is from visitors, would they support a measure to impose a tax on bar and restaurant customers to help cover the cost to the city incurred from the visitors? Jones answered no, while the other three candidates confirmed they would.

All four answered yes that the interests of residents should be a higher priority than the interests of visitors, and the bars and restaurants that serve them.

There were some differing opinions when asked if REALTORS® and developers should be prohibited from being on the design review board (due to potential conflicts of interest). Both Jones and Whalen disagreed with the idea, Mancuso said maybe, and Weiss thought maybe one of the groups, but not the other.

During the question on if they support the use of Roundup as weed abatement in any of Laguna's open spaces, Jones was the only yes answer, while all three of the others opposed the idea.

All four supported bringing Zoom participation back to public meetings, although Whalen said it should happen "eventually" and Weiss said "now."

In another lightning round, all four agreed that the city sees six million or more visitors per year.

There was more agreement by all of the candidates in support of parking structures if paid for by business improvement districts, funded completely by commercial property owners.

The four council contenders again concurred that, considering how many DUIs occur in Laguna Beach, the city could consider placing a cap on the number of conditional use permits that allow the sale of alcohol.

During another question, Weiss and Mancuso agreed that the city should have an oath of office for councilmembers that clearly delineates a duty to put the interests of the residents first. Jones was also supportive of the idea, if it's legal. Whalen said no.

Although the lightning round requested the candidates to answer either yes or no, both Weiss and Mancuso added some context when asked if there should be a cap on the number of city employees. Weiss said they are probably already overstaffed and there should be a moratorium on hiring to reduce the number. Mancuso answered no, fundamentally, to the question, but agreed that they need to look at the employee roster

numbers and make sure they have the right staff in place. Both Whalen and Jones replied no without any additional commentary.

They also were all supportive of the city developing more recreational facilities (tennis, pickleball and basketball courts, soccer fields, baseball diamonds, swimming pools, etc.). It depends on what the residents want, Weiss clarified.

Other questions covered a variety of topics, including: Rotation of mayor and mayor pro tem roles; management of accessory dwelling units; height limits of Downtown and preserving historic homes.