City of Mountain View
City Council Interviews
January 2019

The summary below is based on interviews that were conducted in January 2019 by Shawn Spano, Communication Consultant, with (in alphabetical order): Margaret Abe-Koga, Chris Clark, Alison Hicks, Ellen Kamei, Lisa Matichak, John McAlister and Lucas Ramirez.

The summary is organized into three sections: (1) Learning about individual Council members, (2) How Council members should communicate and work together and (3) Council communication with Staff. Key points that emerged in response to the questions that were asked are included in the form of summary statements, paraphrases, and direct quotes.

Section One: Learning about individual Council Members

1. *What inspired you to become involved in public service? What do you want to achieve in the next two years?*

   There were a variety of factors discussed, with more overlap and similarities than differences.

   - All of you said that your experience doing community service work in Mountain View was a factor in shaping your decision to run for Council. That work includes serving on Planning Commission, serving on different community groups and organizations and developing community projects and programs. All of you were engaged in the community in one way or another before you ran for Council. All of you said you are committed to serving the community – "I have a passion for public service."

   - Some of you "caught the political bug" at a young age because of family circumstances, and from working on political campaigns and for elected officials.

   - Some of you first thought about running for Council because others approached you and encouraged you to run. There wasn't a particular issue or problem that you were focused on.

   - Others decided to run because you felt that particular issues needed to be addressed (e.g. neighborhood issue, growth and development), and that your background and experience made you well suited to tackle those issues.

   - When asked what you want to achieve in the next two years, most of you said you were focused on broad issue areas, such as transportation, housing, middle-income earners and quality of life; while others identified specific projects such as the transit station, downtown and recreational vehicles.

2. *What types of information are important to you in your decision making process? For example, do you prefer quantitative or qualitative information? Do you prefer summaries or more specific, detailed information?*

The responses here show that there are many similarities in how you all approach your work as Council members, along with some differences or points of emphasis.

- Most of you said that you have a preference for quantitative information and data, in order to help facilitate "fact-based decision making." Others said that you prefer qualitative information that involves public input, opinions and perceptions formed by personal and professional experiences and site visits.

- Regardless of preference, all of you said that you use both quantitative and qualitative information depending on the nature of the issue or decision (is it complex? Is it new and unfamiliar? Is it controversial? Etc.).

- Most of you said that you prefer summaries to detailed information, but that also depends on whether the issue is new, complex or controversial. In those cases, detailed information is needed.

- Some of you prefer detailed information to summaries on most issues, in large part because you want as much information as possible so that you are comfortable and confident in making decisions.

- One of the advantages of summaries, and disadvantages of detailed information, is that they help Council stay at a policy level, as opposed to getting into the operational details that staff is responsible for.

- One of the disadvantages of summaries, and advantages of detailed information, is that they do not always facilitate a deep and comprehensive understanding of issues and projects.

Section Two: Working with Your Council Colleagues

3. *Imagine that in the next year significant differences between Council members emerge on an important policy issue. How should you and your Council colleagues handle this policy difference?*

Council offered the following suggestions for handling policy differences (below). In addition, several of you said that it is important to accept policy differences as a natural and normal part of the political process, recognizing that Council members do not share the same philosophy, ideology, beliefs or perspectives on the community.

- Have a thorough, thoughtful and comprehensive discussion of the policy issue and policy difference; see if that produces any changes in people's positions. If not, take the vote and then move on.

- Agree to disagree in a respectful and professional manner; do not make it personal (i.e. separate the policy from the person).

- Be willing to compromise, and willing to seek common ground.

- Acknowledge the differences and then brainstorm possible alternatives, options and compromises.

- Seek to understand the other person's position and how it differs from your own; remember that understanding does not mean agreement.

- Focus on what is best for the community

4. *Imagine that you and one or more of your Council colleagues have style differences, interpersonal conflict or disagree about how you are conducting yourselves. How should you and your colleagues handle these differences*?

Council offered the following suggestions for handling style differences and interpersonal conflicts:

- Address the difference directly with the person, with openness and honesty

- Use an intermediary, a third party person who has the trust and support of the participants who have the difference.

- Set informal ground rules with each other about how you will manage personal differences, with the goal of bridging the differences

- Accept style differences; accept people for who they are – "we don't have to like each other, but we do need to be respectful."

5. *What do you think makes for an effective Council meeting? What can Council and staff do to help make meetings run smoother and be more efficient?*

- Council members do not "lecture," "talk down" or "shut down" each other.

- Council members talk primarily to each other during the discussion period, not the public or staff.

- For non-controversial items, dispense with the staff presentation and discussion and go directly to the vote.

- Everybody participates and expresses their views concisely; Council members avoid "long speeches" and "over participating."

- The Mayor summarizes the discussion when the topic has been exhausted (i.e. when no new information or perspectives are emerging).

- Conduct straw votes to determine Council's initial positions; will help determine whether additional discussion is needed.

- Council members come prepared for meetings, having read the packet and asked staff their questions in advance; will help avoid unnecessary questions at the meeting.

6. *Looking at Council's "How We Work Together" guidelines from 2017, what changes do you suggest?*

   There was broad agreement that the Council Interaction Norms and Meeting/City Communication Norms are relevant and useful, though some questioned the utility value of the guidelines given that they are written at a high level of abstraction. No changes, edits or revisions were offered.

7. *How should Council manage and respond to any violations of the How We Work Together guidelines?*

   Council offered several suggestions for responding when the guidelines are violated (below). Importantly, several of you said that it is important to respond and act on a violation if it affects Council's ability to function together effectively. As one Council member said, "Address it when it happens - don't let it fester."

   - Talk directly to the person in private.
   - Use the City Manager as a sounding board or liaison/mediator.
   - Avoid negative emotions (i.e. anger, frustration).
   - Apply gentle social pressure.
   - Empower the Mayor to enforce the guidelines during public meetings.

Section Three: Council and Staff Relations

8. *How do you view Council's role in Mountain View's city government compared to staff? What types of decisions are most important for Council to focus on?*

   There was broad agreement that Council's role is to focus on "policy;" while Staff's role is to focus on implementing policy decisions and day-to-day operations. As one of you said, "Council is responsible for policy decisions; staff is responsible for execution."

9. *What do you and your Council colleagues need from staff to be most effective?*

   There was a range of answers here. Some of them overlap, while others were unique to particular council members. Importantly, all of you expressed confidence and appreciation for staff and the work they do.

   - Most of you said you want staff to continue to provide "good staff work" in the form of timely and accurate information, facts, analyses and recommendations.

- Most of you said you want staff to put the information in context, providing the history, previous actions and reasoning that led to the recommendations. As one Council member said, "show Council and the public your work."

- Some of you said you want staff to be "more detailed," to "flag new items" or "items that were changed or revised," and to avoid mistakes (e.g. typos, errors, etc.) as much as possible.

10. *What can you and your colleagues do to support staff's effectiveness?*

There was a range of answers here too. Some of them overlap, while others were unique to particular council members. Importantly, all of you expressed confidence and appreciation for staff and the work they do.

- Most of you said Council can help staff by asking questions in advance (the process currently in place is working well); and by not surprising, embarrassing or "calling out" staff in public.

- Most of you said Council can help staff by providing directional clarity and certainty, by not delaying difficult decisions that are administratively ready to be decided.

- Some of you said Council can help staff by being mindful of staff's workload, staff morale and by providing the resources needed to get the work done successfully.