

Lakeport Council candidates' questionnaires: Suzanne Lyons

Contributed by Suzanne Lyons
 Thursday, 16 October 2008
 Last Updated Thursday, 16 October 2008

Suzanne Lyons

Age: 64

Experience and community involvement: My family and I have lived in Lakeport for 20 years. My experience in government and community service includes attending and participating at the Lakeport City Council meetings for the past year, including budget meetings, planning meetings and special meetings of the water department.

I'm the secretary of the Clear Lake Advisory Subcommittee, secretary of the Terrace Beach Association and former Vice President of the North Haven School PTA. I am a volunteer with the Main Street Redevelopment Project and I volunteer at Hospice. I have volunteered with Adult Literacy, the Lake County Land Trust, and been an advocate and interpreter for the Deaf Community. I am attending meetings of the Integrated Water Management Committee.

Endorsements: Lake County Supervisor Denise Rushing, Bob and Barbara Bridges, The Sierra Club, Holly Harris and Chuck Lamb, and the Lake County Democrats.

1. Explain what you believe a city council member's responsibilities are. How would you fulfill these? What qualifications do you possess that make you a good candidate for office?

Council members listen to reports from various departments and using information gained from those reports, budget information and direction from constituents, guide the workings of the city toward the best practices to benefit the city. They are responsible for deciding, with public input, how best to provide services and infrastructure and instrumental in guiding public policy. I'm a good listener, a good problem solver and I do my homework regarding reading and understanding reports and presentations. These attributes qualify me to be a city council member.

2. There are several large development projects inside and outside of Lakeport that are being discussed. They include Cristallago, a golf course and subdivision on the city's sewer property, a potential marina and commercial development on the Dutch Harbor property, and a proposal to build a large hotel within the city limits. What is your opinion on these various projects? Are they good for Lakeport? Why or why not?

The large developments like Cristallago and the proposed sewer/golf subdivision concern me. There is no evidence that the city's infrastructure could support either project. Water and wastewater treatment are huge concerns. We just mitigated a cease-and-desist order at the treatment facility on Highway 175 and were left with 77 hook ups after putting in \$2 million in upgrades.

The first right of refusal contract the present City Council has entered into concerning a 2,100-unit development at build out on our present water treatment facility calls for the city to assist the developer in providing water and sewer facilities for this development with no hard figures to limit the city's commitment. There is no documentation to support the notion that we have the water capacity to provide for this development. The proposed site is not within the city limits or the sphere of influence and would not be allowed under our current general plan. Sections of the proposed new general plan are being written specifically to allow this development. There are no jobs on the horizon to employ the potential residents and no upgrades to our roads that would accommodate over 4,000 extra vehicles. The developers were also promised they could have the city's Dutch Harbor property in the bargain. The property the taxpayers paid \$8 million for is offered to the developers for \$1.5 million.

The same developers are pushing for the Cristallago development. Neither project is within the Lakeport city limits but both would have serious impacts on the city's infrastructure. The other sewer treatment plant, for North Lakeport, is under a cease and desist at present. So why is a large development being planned for this area? The city and county need to collaborate on these proposed developments. How will city streets like Lakeshore Boulevard be impacted? Lakeshore has a projected drivability rating of "F" in the next 10 years. How will it handle the increased traffic and who will pay for its repair? I have heard of no feasibility studies or studies concerning the desirability of a hotel on the city's waterfront. The idea would be a lot more interesting in my mind if some factual data were introduced into the dialogue.

My research concerning these mega developments leads me to believe they amount to exploitation of the agricultural assets and infrastructure of our county by out-of-county developers who have no ongoing stake or commitment to Lakeport. Exhausting our natural resources for the sole benefit of these out-of-towners is not good public policy.

3. Explain how your management style would be applied to your position as council member. Are you hands-on or do you set policy and delegate?

I think of myself as hands-on because I like to see for myself how projects proceed. As an artist, I learned that what you believe a project will look like and the actual final outcome can be surprisingly different. But I have built a house, which entailed hiring and directing a great number of "staff" from those who drew the plans to those who installed water and underground utilities to those who installed carpet and landscaping.

I was the assistant manager of an antiques collective setting policy and managing day-to-day operations for 16 very independent small businesses and am secretary of both the Clear Lake Advisory Subcommittee and the Terrace Beach

Association, so I have experience with delegating and setting policy. I taught for many years and had aides for whom I would set a course of action, expectations, and measures of accountability. So while I can set policy and delegate, I am responsible for seeing the job is done right.

4. While the city of Lakeport may use eminent domain, the Redevelopment Agency currently does not have eminent domain authority as a tool for acquiring property. However, earlier this year it was proposed that the Redevelopment Agency amend its plan to include eminent domain, and that discussion is expected to be continued after the election. How do you feel about the use of eminent domain? Should the city's plan be modified to add that power?

While the power of eminent domain may be a tool for positive change when used properly, I've seen too many instances of misuse of power in Lakeport's current city government to feel comfortable with granting this power to the Redevelopment Agency. While the city can own property for public use, such as parks and recreation facilities, the Redevelopment Agency cannot. If city owned property, like Dutch Harbor, is sold to the Redevelopment Agency, it subsequently must be resold. In this instance, it would be a tool for taking public land (now effectively open space) and selling it to a private concern. How will this benefit the citizens of Lakeport?

5. Do you feel the redevelopment agency's budget is being spent for the right purposes and on the right projects?

I question the focus of the redevelopment budget. One of the first goals cited in redevelopment law, on page two of the Lakeport Redevelopment Plan for the area is: "The elimination of blighting influences & including buildings in which it is unsafe or unhealthy for persons to live or work &"; Yet I have not heard of any research to find out if grants or loans are available to help retrofit the unsafe structures on Main Street.

I have heard the city manager speak enthusiastically about restoring the second story living accommodations on some of these buildings. Where is the reality check here? I have spoken at length to the director of the redevelopment project. And, while I believe he is sincere and committed to his job and highly competent, I question the focus of this project.

I have heard nothing regarding low- and moderate-income housing, which is supposed to be one of the Redevelopment Project goals. The budget for 2008-09 shows no money budgeted for the Main Street Revitalization Project and none budgeted for Development Partnership Agreements. There was zero money spent on housing loans in 2007-08 through the Redevelopment Agency Low/Moderate Housing Fund nor was any spent on housing through the Revolving Loan fund. Since \$4,085,000 is proposed for land, structures and improvements in 2008-09, I wonder that none of it is proposed to make improvements in the neighborhoods where taxpayers in the Redevelopment Area are living. Remember we are funding these projects through bonds that will be repaid by those of us who live in the area.

Is a major hotel and marina what we need? Is that where all of our money should be spent? Have we actually done our due diligence to find out how many customers we will have for this type of facility? Also, according to the Director of the Redevelopment Agency, a four-star hotel would have height requirements that would exceed our General Plan's restrictions. How much of our redevelopment money would it require to upgrade existing motel facilities on the Lakeshore so that we preserve our open space on the shoreline? The preservation of open space is one of the goals cited as a purpose of Redevelopment Law in the plan. The map of Lakeport, available in the Planning Department, shows how little open space the city has available now and much of that open space is covered with blacktop for parking purposes.

I participated in the original group of volunteers who met and discussed plans for the Main Street rehabilitation. But after three meetings, we were no longer consulted. Some of the major ideas we discussed were: the use of the center turn lane on Main Street for the installation of a fountain, making part of Main Street one way and installing diagonal parking. These types of issues should be open to public debate, not decided by committee or department. Our downtown is not going to become economically viable because we plant petunias and paint facades. It will become economically viable if it provides goods and services that appeal to customers who visit our town because of its unique amenities.

6. The city is dealing with a tight budget this year, and could be facing similar issues in the coming budget year as well. How would you propose meeting the city's budget challenges while protecting city services? Are there any areas of spending that you believe should be reconsidered, or any potential revenue streams that should be pursued?

Cities are facing tough choices so we are going to have to think about new ways to look at ourselves, and we need to not waste money. A project in the works now is the Safe Routes to School program that is being funded by a grant. The pathway chosen climbs up Hartley where, according to Doug Grider, head of the Public Works Department for Lakeport, the hillside will need to be cut back and retaining walls rebuilt on the North East side of the street. That will be a very expensive project compared to what would have been needed to repair the bike lanes on Lakeshore Boulevard and put in a stop sign at Lakeshore and Lange or taking the path up Gieselman, which already has sidewalks along much of its length.

The city is involved in litigation over the Vista Point sale that will include paying attorneys (never cheap) whether the city prevails or not. There was reference in the Lake County News online newspaper to a second possible suit against the city of Lakeport. Contract disputes over real estate deals that are not covered by insurance seem to stem from sloppy business practices on the city's part. We should not sign contracts to sell the same property to two different buyers at the same time. At last week's council meeting there was almost \$5,000 in pay warrants to defend against one suit, and this is just the beginning. The damages amount to almost \$8 million. Why did this happen?

The city council voted a hiring freeze, yet the two new public employees who were proposed by departments since that freeze were both hired with almost no discussion. In the case of the employee hired to take over some of the duties of the water department head, no council member questioned the necessity of that hire & could the job have been handled by consolidation from other departments?

The city of Clearlake has already received funds and fixed miles of roads with a state grant that Lakeport has not even applied for. When I spoke to our city manager about the possibility of job partnerships to institute boat inspection stations to help with county efforts to keep invasive species out of Clear Lake he told me, "We don't want those types of low-paying jobs."

When I look at the City Council department breakdown in the budget, I see almost \$130,000 a year more spent in 2006, 2007 and 2008 than in 2008-09. This is in the area of contractual services. What made these services so important in previous years if they are unnecessary now? Why in 2005-06 did we pay \$277,000 for equipment to pave streets and only \$13,965 in road projects?

Why is the trash hauler not required to pay his franchise fees to the city but allowed to keep raising the rates? Why was the owner of Will-o-Point not required to make restitution to the city for his property's role in costing Lakeport several million dollars in sewer plant upgrades? Wasteful spending is poor public policy.

7. Measure I, which generates revenue from sales tax for city projects such as roads, was instituted in 2004. Do you believe Measure I funds are being spent properly? Are there any projects that you believe are particularly appropriate or inappropriate for the funds?

A City Council member explained the genesis of Measure I funds like this: The citizens of Lakeport were asked to approve a half-cent sales tax hike to pay for road repairs. The citizens voted it down. The measure was proposed a second time and again defeated. I remember people saying at the time that they didn't vote for the measure because they didn't believe the money would actually be used to fix the roads. The council hired a consultant to advise them on how to get the money appropriated. The consultant told them that because the measure was targeted toward one issue, roads, it needed a two-thirds majority to pass it. They advised the council to craft a new measure that would not target money limited exclusively for road repair. In that way the measure could pass with a simple majority. Thus measure I was passed. Now council members tell us the Measure I funds can legally be used to pay for general fund projects, and taxpayers feel tricked.

One of the projects that has profited from Measure I funding is the Westshore Pool. I feel this project is very worthwhile. It gives children a safe, healthy activity. It teaches swimming, which is an important skill for all children but especially for children who live near a large body of water. It provides a safe, social outlet for our youth. And the pool could be a self-sustaining entity if it were well promoted. There should be signs letting visitors know that this facility is available.

Some of the major projects included in the Measure I budget included Safe Routes to School and a major flood damage project. The reason given for using Measure I funds for these projects was that "payback" grants need to have front money extended which will be paid back when the projects are completed. Direction was given to staff at the last City Council meeting to research whether the "float" for these kinds of projects should come from Measure I funds or would the General Fund reserve be a better source.

The problem of road condition is a serious one, and I have some questions about the use of those funds to purchase \$3000,000 worth of equipment to fix roads and then not do the necessary road projects. I also question why the bicycle lanes are not being resurfaced when the adjoining roads are repaired and why turn lanes and crosswalks are not being installed and kept well marked for the safety of cyclists and pedestrians. Whether the taxpayers were scammed or not, the money is being paid and the roads are still in miserable condition.

8. Some citizens have said they want to see more transparency in city government. As a council member, how would you address that concern? What does transparency in government mean to you?

I am one of the citizens who feels transparency in our city government is important. The lawsuits that are plaguing our city now are the result of bad policies that very likely would not have been part of an open public process. Meetings with private developers who propose taking the Natural High School property for their private clubhouse should not be held at 4 p.m. when working citizens cannot attend.

A citizen who cannot attend council meetings because she is in a wheelchair and cannot get transportation after 6 p.m. gave the city a Web camera so they could web stream the meetings. The offer included tech support. That was 10 months ago, and the council has refused to use the equipment. I believe the meetings should be broadcast on television. I am planning with the local radio station to have high lights of the council meetings broadcast on the radio.

My hope is that with a responsive city council more citizens will attend the meetings, and their input will improve our city in ways the local citizens desire.

9. Over the past year the city has established a long-range business plan for the city. Do you believe this plan includes relevant projects and ideas for the city's future? What is your vision for the city of Lakeport over the next 20 years?

I have attended several meetings concerning the business plan. It does not seem as much a plan as a wish list. I expect a business plan to have some numbers. I have written business plans, and they use flow charts to make sales projections that can be expected from populations depending on size, age and income. The city council projects 20,000 new citizens in Lakeport in the next 20 years. But there are projections that the roads countywide will be "F" rated within 10 years. We have no idea what our water capacity is and our wastewater capacity will not support much growth.

I am surprised that the lake itself is seldom mentioned in the business plan meetings. Lakeport has so many unique attributes. The potential for bicycling, bird watching, kayaking and hiking is great and virtually untapped. I believe we need to recognize that we are not only a viable destination in the summer. We have some of our most gorgeous weather in the fall. The clean air, lack of traffic and small town atmosphere will not remain if we decide to try to build our way to economic prosperity by outgrowing our resources. I think our business plan should center on why we live here and how we can maintain our bucolic lifestyle and still create a sustainable economy.

10. If elected, is there any project or issue you plan to tackle first?

The most important issue facing the whole county is the health of the lake. Getting the cities of Clearlake and Lakeport, and the surrounding county to make a plan to keep various invasive species out of our lake is of the utmost importance. I believe there are jobs to be had in this process and new businesses for the area. We cannot rely on government to provide for all of the necessities any more. But we can and should have government supporting efforts by the private sector to mitigate problems that will affect all of us. I think that two other major issues are redevelopment and mitigating

our road upgrade problems. I feel business partnerships and support for local small business owners are more important issues than a major downtown facelift or large-scale waterfront project. The City Council does not take the issue of invasive species in our lake seriously but, at the same time wants to promote out-of-county boat traffic with a new marina.

The people of Lakeport pledged their sales tax money to get their roads fixed. Every attempt should be made to satisfy them that their needs are being addressed.

Certainly, putting in crosswalks at strategic places, keeping them well defined and encouraging more foot traffic and bicycle traffic could promote the well being of our town for both local and visiting taxpayers. A program to get fast, through traffic to use Highway 29 rather than blast through the downtown running through boulevard stops and scaring pedestrians in crosswalks would be a low-cost plan. Putting a stop sign on Lakeshore Boulevard and a crosswalk for school children and those using the bus stop on Lakeshore would be one solution to encourage fast traffic to use our underused highway.

Having remodeled a 140-year-old house in Lakeport and having built a new house within the last few years has given me experience in both renovation and new construction and the positive and negative issues in both cases. I am committed to saving what is best in the old and embracing what is promising in new, fresh ideas. We need to value both.

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