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CANDIDATES TAKE STANDS ON HOUSING, CELL TOWERS AND ADDRESSES AT CRA FORUM

By MARY SCHLEY

FOUR CANDIDATES for seats on the Carmel City Council in the November election weighed in on house numbers, cell towers, design guidelines, housing, and other issues during the Carmel Residents Association's 17th bi-annual forum Wednesday night.

Former U.S. Rep. Sam Farr moderated the discussion and noted at the outset that he was glad to see a panel that is "less elderly."



Jeff Baron



Alissandra Dramov



Parker Logan



Ashley Stoddard

'I talk a lot'

In his opening statement, incumbent Jeff Baron talked about his accomplishments while in office, including helping to shepherd the city and residents through the pandemic, developing his monthly newsletter to keep residents informed, creating a neighbors-helping-neighbors group with former councilwoman Jan Reimers, and drafting climate change plans and documents that have been adopted by the council.

"I talk a lot on the dais, I try to be honest with my thoughts — which sometimes gets me into trouble — and I love the village," Baron concluded. Challenger Alissandra Dramov said she's lived in town for most of her life — 30 years full-time and 20 years parttime — and worked in television as a reporter and anchor before moving back here. She wrote four books on the history and architecture of the village, and most recently became involved in the fight with Verizon over plans to install a cell tower on Carmelo south of Eighth.

"That civic activism led me to run for office," she said. "I want to preserve the Carmel that I love, and I want to make Carmel better, as Carmel deserves better."

Sade's bar owner Parker Logan said he's a fourth-generation resident who's running for council "because I think I can make a difference."

"I have the energy, time and voice of leadership," he said, and his platform is "the residents," who have lost confidence in their city leaders.

Gallery owner Ashley Stoddard talked about her involvement in the art world and her deep family roots. Married with three kids, Stoddard said she focuses on community projects and empowering youth through the arts. She was inspired to run for office by her experience as board chair of the Carmel Chamber of Commerce, especially during the pandemic, when she saw how people worked together and observed "the best in humankind."

"I believe each person in the community has an obligation to serve," she said. "I absolutely love working here and will not take it for granted."

Design guidelines and housing

With the state's "regional housing needs allocation" — the "minimum projection of additional housing units needed to accommodate projected household growth of all income levels" over a certain period of time — concluding the city needs to accommodate 349 new housing units by 2030, Stoddard noted that the town lacks enough water to accomplish that.

"I would utilize what we do have — we have many homes that are not occupied much of the year," that might be somehow used or expanded to accommodate workforce housing, she said.

Baron said he has no idea where that many new residences would go but that next year's update of the housing element and zoning code will contemplate that question. "We will all together come up with a way to do this," he said. "I don't know what the answer is." He also said "I don't know what the answer is." He also said he's confident the state will resolve the ongoing water shortage.

Dramov focused on converting more downtown office space into residences. "Carmel Plaza has been too large for our community," she added. "The whole top floor could be turned into residential, which would be a great way to get to some of those numbers and would be refreshing." She said the north lot at Sunset Center could also be developed.

Logan said the city lacks the land and other resources from the requirement.

Regarding ongoing efforts to revise the city's residential and commercial design guidelines, Logan said they should be updated to allow for new building materials but retain the "whimsical architecture" and avoid modern design.

"We can't go back and build Comstock cottages, but we can keep things whimsical and unique," he said.

"Carmel is eclectic — we have homes from all different decades starting from the beginning of time," Stoddard commented. "What I think is beautiful is we don't have cookie-cutter homes in this town. We need to embrace that we have the freedom to have very different looking homes that fit into our village and make it interesting and unique."

Baron likened banning modern architecture to mandating that restaurants use only recipes developed before 1950. "Architecture moves forward," he said. "The thing that brings people to Carmel is not the individual houses, it's that they are part of the environment and are all different from one another. That is the thing that is enchanting in Carmel."

Dramov said the key is maintaining historic buildings and being aware of the context when approving new homes. "The problem is when going through the process, people don't look at the surroundings and see if they fit in," she said. Dramov also supports the idea of reinstating the design review board to focus on applications for new homes and remodels.

Parking and house numbers

One of the city's perennial controversies is downtown parking, with many of the city's spaces occupied by workers, leaving visitors and residents with no place to put their cars while they shop or dine. Whether to charge for parking or has been hotly debated, discussed, and tested for decades.

Dramov said she'd work with the chamber and business owners to get employees to stop occupying valuable spaces in the commercial district. "I would like that to be part of a comprehensive downtown plan," she said, adding that paid parking could also be reinstated in the north lot at Sunset Center.

"I am 100 percent against paid parking downtown," Logan said. "It's been tried before, it's failed before, and if you put it to a vote of the residents, I'm sure it would be shot down."

Stoddard suggested that if employees are the problem, the city could operate shuttles, and she said paid parking would allow people more time for shopping and dining than the current two-hour limit. Residents could get passes.

Baron said charges for parking downtown could be more expensive, and in surrounding areas less so, to encourage employees to park outside the central commercial area. Circling blocks in search of parking also releases more pollutants and puts pedestrians and others at greater risk of being hit.

Should houses have numbers? Stoddard said it's a "touchy subject" and that she'd support street addresses to make getting credit cards, loans, utilities, and emergency services easier, but not home mail delivery.

"I would also like to advocate for better service at the post office, she said, including better hours.

Baron supports street addresses. "I spoke to two different households that were awakened by an ambulance that came to the wrong home," he said. "We have residents hunting around on the street trying to figure out where the ambulance is supposed to go. I think addresses are vital to public safety, and I think they're coming."

Dramov suggested inputting the locations of homes into Google so they can be more easily located and said she doesn't support home mail delivery, because the post office would be closed as a result.

Logan doubted having street addresses could ensure better emergency responses, since crews might not be able to read house number in the dark, anyway, and he doesn't support the concept.

Climate and cell towers

As the city works to draft new telecom ordinances and fights with Verizon in court over a cell tower, Baron said it's important "that all the interests are represented at the table," and said people who have poor cell service aren't being included in the ongoing conversation.

Dramov, an ardent support of the Stop Cell Towers in Carmel Neighborhoods group, wants to see strict ordinances to prevent cell towers from proliferating.

Logan said he doesn't have a landline. "Many of us probably don't," he said. "I have wonderful cell service." But he also speculated the wireless companies aren't trying to improve cell service, but to capture more of the streaming market.

Stoddard said "some of us need faster internet service," and argues that poor quality interferes with the ability to conduct business and could impact people's safety during emergencies. But she also said adding cell towers "needs to be done responsibly, aesthetically and in the right places."

The city's new climate adaptation plan and climate action plan approved by the city council in August call for sweeping changes, including electrifying city buildings as much as possible, undergrounding power lines, pushing "energy renovations" in residential and commercial building and energy efficiency in new construction, developing a bicycle master plan, updating the city's fleet, and pushing people to drive electric vehicles.

But Dramov said she's concerned things are moving too quickly, especially since the state's power grid can't meet current demand.

"It will also increase the costs of building homes," she said. "The intentions are good, but we're really not ready to push for some of this."

Logan agreed. "The climate action plan is getting way ahead of the country and state guidelines," he said.

"I would rather be in front of it than behind it," Stoddard said, to protect the area and its natural resources so the generations that follow can enjoy and appreciate them.

"I appreciate the work that's been done, and I say, 'Let's go,'" she said.

Baron, who helped develop the climate action plan with outgoing councilwoman Carrie Theis, said he "obviously" agrees with Stoddard and that the city needs a project manager to oversee the plan's implementation.

"Climate change is the issue of our generation," he said. "Obviously, we're going to do our part, or we're not."

The candidates outlined some of their long-term visions for the city. Logan said he is "adamant about keeping the quaint essential charm that Carmel has delivered for so many decades," while Stoddard said she aims to "teach the children how to love this place that we love."

Baron said the town needs more full-time residents to fuel a vibrant social scene that has been disappearing, and Dramov said she wants to preserve the town's traditions and heritage, beautify the village and better use city-owned buildings.

Lightning Round

Candidates were also given an opportunity to give a thumbs up or thumbs down to several questions. All agreed the city council, boards and commissions should be better informed of each other's efforts and aligned.

On the subject of banning beach fires and allowing only propane, Dramov was the only candidate who said she wanted wood fires to end.

Baron was the only one to support and "empty home tax." Which some of the cities are considering.

Everyone, of course, liked the idea of spending more money and time on making the village prettier.

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