



FRIENDS OF THE HILLS

HILLS 2000

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

WINTER 2000

Volume 2, Issue 1

A Community Divided

Hills 2000 is very concerned about the current climate of divisiveness in Los Altos Hills. Two recent town-wide mailings, the newsletter from the Civic Association, written allegedly to promote community, and the letter from Toni Casey succeed only in polarizing the Town through mis-statements and half truths. Council meetings have lost any semblance of civility. Some Council members are openly hostile to town staff and rude to members of the public. The audience is often packed with ill-behaved, jeering residents recruited to support a particular item on the agenda.

The Civic Association, an organization nominally dedicated to promoting friendship in the Hills, has published a newsletter which further polarizes the community. It derides the Planning Commission by telling only half of the story (see *And Now for the Rest of the Story* on page 3). Roger Burnell is accused of leading a Hills 2000 campaign to remove Charles Wong from the Planning Commission. Roger has never been a member and has never attended a meeting of Hills 2000. While some members of Hills 2000 advocated Wong's ouster, Hills 2000's role as an organization was only to clarify the issue by putting documented facts on its web site. Opinions on the web site are clearly labeled as opinions.

Toni Casey's recent letter to the voters in support of Emily Cheng asserts that Emily will act as a rubber stamp for Casey's agenda to dismantle the planning process and destroy the off-road pathway system. While Toni frequently refers to her mandate, she fails to remember that Jim Steiner only lost the last election by 61 votes. This hardly constitutes a mandate. Almost half the voters did not support her agenda.

Casey's letter presages an expensive negative campaign like the last one. Hills 2000 had hoped that this year voters could enjoy a clear look at the issues facing the Town without spending untold sums of money on mailings and newspaper ads. To address briefly the controversy over 1997 campaign expenses: Jim Steiner calculated total expenses following the State reporting guidelines. Toni points out that these regulations require both candidates in a joint campaign to declare the total spent, since both campaigns benefit. This anomaly means the State figures are nearly double what Finn and Casey actually spent. However, half the State figure is still about \$15,000, almost twice that spent by either Steiner or Schreiner. Previous political campaigns in town have cost about \$5,000.

Hills 2000 would like to see a return to reason and civility in the Hills. Information disseminated should be complete, opinion separated from fact. Council meetings should be conducted with respect for staff, council members and the public. Let's all work together towards this end.

Questions for the Candidates

By Sid Hubbard

On March 7th there will be a critical City Council election to fill the vacancy of Bill Siegel who resigned. There are two candidates running for this position – Emily Cheng and Jim Steiner. Both have been active in the Town and both should have a good idea of how the Town government works. To assist voters in making an informed decision a series of questions are listed below which should give a good indication of the perspectives of the candidates. As there appears to be a split on the Council about the role of Town government, what is acceptable behavior for public officials and the vision for the Town, the answers to these questions become all the more important.

1. What is unique about Los Altos Hills? Should this uniqueness be preserved? How would you help preserve it?

2. Does a council member represent only the people who helped elect him/her to office or the entire Town?
 3. Do Council members have a responsibility to serve the Town on outside agencies such as transportation, water and flood control, community service agencies, etc.?
 4. Do elected and appointed officials have an obligation to uphold the general plan and the ordinances even though they personally disagree with some of these adopted policies?
 5. What responsibilities do elected officials have to help maintain a capable and stable staff?
 6. Recently, a newly appointed Planning Commissioner was found to have zoning code violations on his property, and did not initially respond to letters from the Town staff to correct these violations. How would you have voted if you had been seated on the Council and had to decide whether the Planning Commis-
- (continued on page 3)

A Hills 2000 Member Opinion

As I Saw It

By Betsy Bertram

This past year I have monitored a lot of Planning Commission meetings and most of the Council meetings.

AS I SAW IT the Planning Commission has done an excellent job safeguarding the concepts of the Founding Fathers of our town while facing the challenge of reviewing larger and larger homes and remodels. I sat through many well-organized and respectful meetings listening to sound reasoning for changes and restrictions. When Commissioner Cheng's term ended she chose not to reapply siting "time constraints" and was replaced by a man who to this day does not seem to understand the system and how it works. When Town staff made him aware of violations on his property he refused to work with the Planning Director to correct them stating that there were no violations.

AS I SAW IT, the Council, at least certain members of it, was an embarrassment. There were some very hard issues before the Council this past year and some members resorted to favoritism and grandstanding. The handling of the illegal diversion of water from Hale Creek into the lake at the Quarry Subdivision was an example. Although the conditions of the subdivision and the law were broken, some Council members challenged the staff instead of the developer. These same tactics were used when violations by a Planning Commissioner and a Council member were addressed. A huge lobbying effort intimidated those with honest questions, the integrity of the staff was publicly demeaned and attempts to maintain order failed.

AS I SAW IT we lost our Town Manager and the entire Planning staff. I wonder why? Each one of them contributed so much to preserving the integrity of our Town. They were true administrators of our Town's Charter. They will be missed.

AS I SEE IT many residents now get permits and approved drawings for a project and assume they have the license to do as they please regardless of the ordinances and procedures. It will be interesting to see if ordinary residents are treated differently from Commissioners and Council members.

AS I SEE IT retired Council member Bill Siegel's chair will be hard to fill. His replacement will have not only to sit as a Council member but will represent the Town at meetings of the Association of Bay Area Governments, Valley Transportation Authority Advisory Board, Web site subcommittee. (Bob Johnson has agreed to replace Bill on the Fire District.) He has left quite a hole to fill since some Council members are already overloaded representing the Town on outside committees, and others have refused, or are not available.

AS I SEE IT we are all responsible for this Town. If we are going to maintain the open space feeling that we enjoy now, we must all get involved. Your voice should be heard.

Los Altos Hills Dependant on Outside Agencies

By Bill Siegel

Los Altos Hills is such a small city that many services required by our residents must be secured from organizations outside of Town. The best way to assure that our needs are being met is for Council members to participate actively in these organizations. Participation usually takes the form of membership on the Boards of these service agencies. Let me give you a few examples.

We get our library services from a joint agency with Los Altos and the County. A Los Altos Hills Council member sits on the governing board of the library.

We get our fire, paramedic and emergency communication services from a Fire District whose Board usually includes two Council members. One of our Council members sits on an advisory board to manage flood control for the creeks in our area.

All of our residents experience the growing congestion on our region's transportation network. The agency in charge of addressing these problems is the Valley Transportation Authority and one of our Council members has a seat on this body.

The list continues: Community Services Agency, Cities Association, Disaster Planning. And we haven't mentioned regional agencies such as Air Pollution, Bay Conservation, ABAG regional planning, Metropolitan Transportation, League of California Cities. All of these organizations consist of City Council members.

Since there are only five Los Altos Hills Council members, each member must be willing to take his share of assignments to the most important of these organizations if our residents are to be truly represented. There is a lot more to the job than two City Council meetings a month.

Editor's Note: Bill Siegel represented Los Altos Hills on Fire District, Association of Bay Area Governments and the Valley Transportation Authority. In addition he served on the council subcommittees for the newsletter (with Elayne Dauber) and the web page (with Bob Johnson). Bob Johnson has replaced Bill on the Fire District and is our representative to the Cities Association. Elayne Dauber represents the Town on the Library JPA, NCLA, Santa Clara Valley Water Commission and the Flood Control District. The other openings will likely be filled after the March election.

SAVE THE DATE

Candidate's Night Debate
sponsored by the League of Women Voters

Wednesday, February 23 at 7 p.m.
at the Los Altos Library

And Now For the Rest of the Story

In a continuing campaign of half truths, the Civic Association has, once again, attacked the decisions of the Planning Commission. Examination of earlier Civic Association newsletters and the last political campaign will prove that this is an ongoing problem. Two articles in their December newsletter, *Planning Commission Goofs* and *Kern's Permit Denied Again*, condemn Planning Commission findings. The articles neglect to explain the purpose of the Planning Commission and its role in the planning process. A full explanation of the decisions is below.

The Planning Commission has a clear mission to evaluate applications for development of property using formulas for maximum allowed development area and maximum floor area which are part of the Town's Codes and Ordinances. Commissioners have some leeway in applying these formulas which address lot size and topography, but the Planning Commission does not have carte blanche to approve applications which fall far outside the formulas. It is this important fact that was missing from the Civic Association's two articles on the Planning Commission in their December newsletter. The appeals process to the City Council is in place to handle applications that do not fall under the guidelines when an applicant feels his request for an exception is reasonable. The Council is empowered to overrule the applicable Codes and Ordinances.

In the case of the Lands of Quinn (*Planning Commission Goofs*), the maximum floor area as determined by slope/density formula for the one-half acre lot is under 2,200 square feet. The applicant proposed to build a dwelling over 3,500 square feet. The Planning Commissioners approved 3,000 square feet, 800 over the allowed floor area. When the application was appealed, Council opted to overrule the formula and approved the Quinn's plans. The system of "checks and balances" operated as it was designed.

The Kern's project (*Kern's Permit Denied Again*) has been denied by the Planning Commission and the Council three times. Problems with the lot and driveway access have generated lengthy discussions at both Commission and Council meetings. The proposed drive requires extensive cuts, retaining walls higher than recommended and the slope of the proposed drive is steeper than the allowed 15% grade. Full compliance with the specific criteria set by the City Engineer was required and these criteria were not met in the Kern's last application. Once again, the system of "checks and balances" was successful.

It is important for all of us to understand the careful deliberate process that goes into all Town denials and approvals.

Water Supply

Hills 2000's Educational Forum of Sunday October 10th 1999 could not have happened at a more opportune time. This forum, a first in a series sponsored by Hills 2000, dealt with the reintroduction of native plant materials into our landscaping (see www.Hills2000.org).

With the recent news reports regarding water use in Los Altos Hills (as reported by Karl Sonkin @ NewsCenter 4 and the Palo Alto Daily News, Dec. 29th 1999), these landscaping ideas could go a long way in relieving our dependence on this finite resource. Native plants require little or no summer watering once established and provide food and cover to indigenous animals.

Jan Fenwick, President of our Water District Board has presented findings to our City Council in support of the prudent use of our water. Currently Los Altos Hills is 20% over the annual water allotment as contracted with the San Francisco Water Board. A substantial portion of this over use is due to the increase in trophy homes and the subsequent irrigated vegetation surrounding them.

If in the coming months a California drought is deemed a reality, then Council member Casey will have to reassess her statement, "We have no water problem here in Los Altos Hills". At the very least such a position is short-sighted in an area historically known for water shortfalls.

Questions (continued from page 1)

7. What are the implications of a public official violating the same rules he/she is sworn to uphold?
8. Currently, the Town notifies property owners within 500' of a proposed project prior to public hearings and decisions on the project. Is this distance too much, too little or just about right?
9. Whose rights are more important – the property owner's rights or the rights of the neighbors whose views, privacy and property value might be affected by the new project?
10. Should the town adopt an ordinance that would preserve the off-site views of homes? In other words, when a neighbor's tree blocks your view should there be a means to have this view impact mitigated?
11. Should neighborhood compatibility be a consideration when approving new projects?
12. Should Town Hall be maintained in its present condition, remodeled or replaced?

Editor's note: This article has been shortened due to space constraints. For a full list of questions for the candidates please visit the Hills 2000 web site at www.Hills2000.org.

**Contributers
to this issue**

Fred Osterlund
Denise Williams
Dot Schreiner
Carol Grewal
Bill Siegel
Sid Hubbard
Barbara Lamparter
Betsy Bertram



Fast Track Revisited

Six months after the introduction of the "Fast Track" Ordinance, nine homes or major additions have successfully been approved. About a third of these homes have been located in the Quarry Hills Subdivision where neighbor concerns are minimal. The rest have been scattered throughout Los Altos Hills.

Early reports indicate that the Fast Track review process has reduced the Planning Department's work load by reducing time needed to write staff reports and attend Planning Commission meetings. It has generally reduced the process time by about two weeks. Curtis Williams, the Town's Planning Director, feels that some applicants have actually changed their design plans somewhat in the early stages to meet the "Fast Track" requirements.

Although Curtis Williams is now a half-time consultant to the Town, he is currently reviewing the Fast Track Program and will continue to as his limited time and many tasks allow. The success of Fast Track depends on an experienced Planning Director. Curtis' replacement will not be able to evaluate Fast Track applications until he has mastered the problems unique to Los Altos Hills, especially considering that the entire Planning staff is brand new.

Join Hills 2000 for the Year 2000

**Membership dues of \$20 for 2000 are due. New members are welcome.
Please fill out and return the enclosed envelope or contact Nancy
Couperus at (650) 941-4808 and visit our web site at www.hills2000.org**

**Hills 2000 - Friends of the Hills
Box 31
Los Altos, CA 94023-0031
www.hills2000.org**

Bulk Rate
U.S. Postage
PAID
Los Altos, CA
Permit no. 50

Hills 2000
Friends of the Hills
Newsletter
Statement of Purpose

To provide well researched and unbiased communications on significant issues to all residents of Los Altos Hills.

The Hills 2000 Newsletter is published with assistance from members of Hills 2000.
Editor: Barbara Lamparter