

9/10/2008

City council candidates echo one another's stances on sustainable transportation

Written by Elizabeth Limbach

It's not often that a political forum bursts into song. It was Rick Longinotti, presenting on behalf of the Committee for a Vibrant Downtown, who began singing Joni Mitchell's "Big Yellow Taxi" and encouraged those in attendance to join him. After sharing the committee's reasons for opposing the proposed five-story parking garage at Cedar and Cathcart, he let his slideshow rest on a photograph of the beloved downtown Santa Cruz farmers' market—which currently calls that parking lot home—and led nine of the candidates vying for four city council seats in song: "Don't it always seem to go, you don't know what you've got till it's gone. They paved paradise, and put up a parking lot ..." In the darkened room of the Loudon Nelson Center, it was difficult to tell which candidates sang, but the audience was certainly game.

The parking garage, and the associated livelihood of the venerated local market, was just one of many controversial issues on the table for the Sustainable Transportation Candidates' Forum on Sep. 3, hosted by People Power, the Campaign for Sensible Transportation and the Committee for a Vibrant Downtown. But the forum may not have been the best place for the candidates to stand out from one another—it's tough to make an impact when the hopefuls seem to agree on everything.

Differentiation will be the key in this crowded race, which features two incumbents (current mayor Ryan Coonerty and Tony Madrigal), three former mayors (Katherine Beiers, Tim Fitzmaurice and Don Lane), one retread from 2006 (Simba Kenyatta), and four new faces (labor attorney David Terrazas, medical marijuana advocate Lisa Molyneaux, who was absent, health and wellness coach Blas "Jay" Cabrera, and J. Craig Canada, who shared with the crowd that he once slept on the sidewalk in front of Wachovia Bank for three years).

Most of the candidates supported the speedy implementation of alternative and sustainable transportation solutions over the construction of the parking garage, and all opposed widening Highway 1. They unanimously favored the Rail Trail, and mostly agreed on the improvement of King Street as a bike passageway.

One of the evening's few disagreements came when Longinotti spoke about the proposed parking garage. His committee claims that building the garage would increase auto dependency, be financially irresponsible and harm the prosperity of downtown. It would also displace the farmers' market, although an alternative home at the St. Phillips Episcopal Church parking lot across the street has been offered. Instead, the committee suggests the city abide by the parking demand management recommendations outlined in the 2003 Master Transportation Study (MTS).

In his slideshow, Longinotti presented photographs of downtown parking garages at peak business hours over Labor Day weekend, each garage repeatedly shown with nearly empty top floors. The committee, in accordance with the MTS findings, advocates the conversion of these spaces (mainly permit-only and 12-hour parking, which make up 60 percent of downtown parking) into more customer-oriented parking. If \$1-a-day parking spaces were replaced with two- to three-hour free parking, 19 metered spots and 127 lot spaces would be opened up in Zone 4, the parking district of downtown in which the parking garage is proposed.

Longinotti's revealing photos of available parking generated mild gasps and consenting sounds of disapproval from the audience and council hopefuls. When the candidates took turns answering his

question—“Are you committed to implementing the parking recommendations of MTS rather than the parking garage on Cedar and Cathcart?”—all but one candidate, Mayor Ryan Coonerty who felt “conflicted on this item as a business owner downtown,” adamantly opposed the parking garage.

The Rail Trail was the darling of the evening, unanimously favored and spoken about with glittering visions of connecting the whole region with fast, affordable and environmentally progressive transportation. Tim Fitzmaurice went so far as to say that the trail would be “a horizontal monument to who we are as a people.”

While most of the candidates offered vague suggestions of where the funding would come from (with Tony Madrigal saying the failure of Measure T makes funding particularly hard to find), Simba Kenyatta kept it real: “Use city funds? What city funds? Aren’t we totally broke?” He added that the money would have to come from grants and federal funds. Don Lane offered the most unique idea, suggesting the rail project be powered by volunteer energy.

Similarly in synch, the candidates were a chorus of opposition in regard to widening Highway 1. Newcomer Blas Jacob (“Jay”) Cabrera, who won the award for dropping the word “green” the most times throughout the evening, said that “widening the highway is fueling the war machine by increasing our dependence on foreign oil.” And anyone who is up on their Obama knows that the plan is to kick that habit by 2010. Coonerty pointed out that Santa Cruz’s biggest carbon footprint is from the 1,200 trips its residents make over the hill to work each day; while widening the highway appears to be the most obvious solution for traffic congestion, it is counterproductive to creating sustainable means of transportation. A rail line, promoted carpooling, and—as Coonerty expressed prioritized interest in—creating more jobs in town for locals would all be more efficient means of decreasing highway traffic as well as the town’s part in global warming.

Whether to turn King Street into a “bike boulevard” by diverting traffic onto Mission Street or to remove parking on one side of the street to include a bikeway, prompted the largest variety of answers for the evening. With the exception of a once-again conflicted Coonerty, the candidates all advocated one or both of the options as a means of increasing bike safety and accessibility in town. Both Katherine Beiers and David Terrazas, however, stressed the importance of thorough studies of the area and surveys with its residents before any decisions are made.

As the night came to an end, a question from the audience put the room into an anxious silence: “How did you get here tonight?” Everything was still for a moment. Surely someone was about to be revealed as non-green. At least one of these candidates had to have driven their SUV to the meeting. But, no. The answers came—one carpooled, four biked and four walked—and no hypocrite was unmasked.