

**QUESTIONS FOR THE CANDIDATES FOR CULVER CITY COUNCIL
ON RESIDENTIAL ZONING**

Issued to every candidate on February 28, 2016
Responses submitted between March 7 and March 9, 2016

Candidates who responded:

Goran Eriksson
Jay Garacochea
Daniel Lee
Meghan Sahli-Wells
Thomas Aujero Small
Marcus Tiggs

Candidates who declined to respond:

Scott Wyant

Introduction written to the candidates: *The following questions are on behalf of a group of concerned and involved Culver City residents. During your campaigning, you may have learned that many residents feel strongly that our neighborhoods are rapidly losing their unique characteristics in the currently building boom. The changes the City Council recently adopted to Culver City's antiquated R-1 zoning codes are a step in the right direction. However, the City continues to refine the balance between minimizing impact on current owners while promoting responsible growth through updates to its residential zoning codes. As a Councilmember, you will be quickly asked to consider both the immediate and long term health and happiness of our residents, so we greatly appreciate your taking the time to address the following questions.*

- 1. With a recent quantifiable increase in large home construction and increasing public outcry in opposition would you characterize Culver City as being at a residential crossroads? In regards to residential neighborhoods, please explain your vision of where CC is now and how its future is being shaped.**

ERIKSSON: People choose to move to Culver City because of its small-town charm, great schools and walkable neighborhoods. We need to remain vigilant as we fight to protect the community we love and stand up for our quality of life. We must assure that developers of all sizes make preservation of our city's quality of life the highest priority, making sure the density, height and character of their projects fits into the fabric of the neighborhood. In that sense, Culver City is at a residential crossroads, but every residential area is not the same, and the requirements and the vision we have for each neighborhood changes naturally over time. That is why I believe it is vital for us to explore revisions to the city's General Plan that will give the city greater control over development and bring the city's outdated planning documents into the 21st Century to more effectively address today's neighborhood needs. Our General Plan and our zoning documents that guide development in our residential areas and throughout our city are, in parts, decades old. They don't contemplate the issue of mansionization. They don't do a good job of addressing areas where we need more density and areas where we need less. They were written before we had a booming downtown, before we had a Expo Line station and before Silicon Beach spread all way to

Culver City. My vision for the future of Culver City includes a comprehensive evaluation of our General Plan and significant input from our residents. Only by working together and crafting a vision, on paper in our planning documents, can we guide the city in the direction we want it to go.

GARACOCHEA: I do not believe that we are at a crossroads. I do, however, feel as though the city is evolving into the future. I grew up in on the north side of Santa Monica and saw small homes get torn down one by one. Now, when you look to purchase in Santa Monica on the north side you will find that it is very expensive. You would be very fortunate to own a smaller home from 25 years ago in SM still today. I think that Culver City is a ways off from this but it could be in our near future, it all depends on the market. Look how the downtown of Culver City has evolved, the neighborhoods are always soon to follow.

LEE: Right now Culver City has benefitted from an uptick in development but much of that has been too fast and too unsustainable. Commercially, businesses and complexes have developed without the full input of the community and their opinions in regards to how they make the most of developments. Residentially, there has been marked conflict between newer (and some older) residents expanding homes without regard to the impact that these expansions have on their neighbors or the environmental impact. With an updated city general plan and a sustainability plan we can come to decision collectively about regulations that would maintain the community feel of Culver City without infringing too harshly on the rights of property owners.

SAHLI-WELLS: Yes, I agree that Culver City is at a crossroads. Our city has historically been solidly working and middle class. As we've been successful at maintaining a high level of quality of life and public services, combined with being located on the Westside, Culver City has become one of the most desirable places to live in LA County. This has created serious economic pressures, which threaten the very qualities that make ours such an attractive community. We're seeing developers buy up properties, destroy original homes to create large houses that maximize profit, while compromising the privacy, views, sunlight, air, and space once enjoyed by their neighbors. Although I am not opposed to change, growth, or modern styles, I do strongly believe – and have voted accordingly - that we must stop allowing homes that do not respect the quality of life of their neighbors. We need to re-balance, and develop zoning that permits reasonable expansion and property improvement, without compromising the property rights of those who live next door.

SMALL: Culver City is out of watershed moment in its history, in regard to development both in the commercial and residential sectors. In regard to residential neighborhoods we need to carefully guide development, to both simplify and fast track the upgrade of our housing stock with quality construction and development, and to protect the quality and character of our traditional neighborhoods. We need to reach out to the communities in those neighborhoods and thoughtfully craft design guidelines, Specific plans for neighborhoods, and zoning overlays as needed. These are design problems that are encountered in a successful and popular city with a growing population and economy, and aging housing stock. A combination of good design solutions and outreach and communication with the residents can solve these problems and lead us toward a successful and harmonious future. We have an extraordinary design community here in Culver City that will be eager to support us.

TIGGS: Culver City is at a crossroads where older homeowners (or their heirs) are selling 30-40s era homes at premium prices (normally to spec builders/developers). The houses are torn down and new homes are built sometimes up to 3x the size of the previous structure, hitting setbacks to the

minimums at all sides. Thus in most instances creating out of place structures for the area. Not all areas are feeling this trend equally. During my campaign walking the Dr. Carlson Park area it became apparent Carson Park is the epicenter with some streets have 2-3 projects going on at the same time. While I am a proponent of the property owner's right to build according to the existing zoning codes, I believe not keeping this in check will drastically change the character of the neighborhoods to an extent over time the neighborhoods become unrecognizable. A balance needs to be reached with maintaining a semblance of the neighborhoods character while allowing property owner to remodel/upgrade their property.

2. Do you believe the new regulations for R1 zoning are adequate or do they warrant further study? (For example, the current zoning code still allows for the construction of a home that is more than twice the size of the average current Culver City homes.)

ERIKSSON: As I mentioned above, we need to take a whole new look at our General Plan and our zoning documents to make them responsive to issues like this. There are places in the city where a 3,000-square-foot house makes sense and places where it does not.

GARACOCHEA: The R1 regulations are moving in the right direction but there could be some fine tuning. I do not believe that we as a city need to spend a vast amount of money on a study. I do not mind if a house is built twice the size, especially when the average house, in my neighborhood for instance, is only 1,000 sq feet. If my neighbor drops a lot of money into making his home better and increasing the size, then my property value increases.

LEE: I think these regulation warrant further study. I believe in the rights of homeowners but many of these regulations protect instead the rights of developers (some of whom may also be homeowners, granted). There should be an effort to provide a sense of neighborhood consistency and community in the overall building plan of Culver City and this could be done in a neighborhood by neighborhood manner but even that method should spring from an overall city plan which comprehensively address this and other issues.

SAHLI-WELLS: Although they are a positive first step forward to address this issue, I do not believe that the new regulations, which I voted to approve, go far enough. Notably, they 1) still allow for home sizes far exceeding prevailing neighborhood standards, and 2) in some cases, create unintended consequences which can potentially undermine their effectiveness. If you compare Blair Hills to Carlson Park, you will quickly understand that a "one size fits all" approach to R-1 development is completely absurd. This is why I strongly voiced throughout the rule-making process - and voted to approve - the hiring of an outside consultant who will do extensive public engagement and neighborhood-by-neighborhood analysis, to refine and strengthen the existing regulations. These must respond to the unique characteristics of each neighborhood.

SMALL: The new regulations for our one zoning are not adequate to solve these problems. We have different neighborhoods with differing issues and a one-size-fits-all solution will not suffice. We need to engage in further study and a significant outreach program to communicate with the residents themselves.

TIGGS: The new regulations are inadequate. While utilizing FARs and tweaking heights and so on is a good start, area specific design guidelines must be implemented. While on the Planning

Commission I was involved with the development of the Gateway area design guidelines. This was with the heavy lifting by the community stakeholders, staff and the planning commission. It was tedious and hard work but it was necessary and worth the effort. Here in Carlson Park this needs to be considered and I would support this to fine tune what the residents vision Carlson Park should look like 10-20 years from now.

- 3. At a recent Council meeting, the Council directed the Planning Department and City Manager to prepare an RFP to hire an outside consultant to further study and refine our residential zoning and codes. Is it your opinion that investing the time and money in a thorough study from an independent outside consulting firm will be in the long term best financial interest of Culver City? Why or why not? (Other nearby cities and communities have done such as they re-evaluate and update their respective residential zoning codes).**

ERIKSSON: I believe this is an important expenditure of city funds. For too long, we have relied on outdated documents to guide development in our city. We need to provide developers and residents who want to improve their homes with a set of rules that guides development in a way that makes sense for today's Culver City, not 1990's Culver City. By defining a set of development rules, we can encourage the kind of development we want, where we want it. Once that task is complete, we need to budget for regular reviews so that the city's General Plan is never as out of touch with the fabric of our city as it is today.

GARACOCHEA: I would have to see what the RFP comes in at. I would then have to hear from both sides of the public. I believe that we could learn from a lot of the surrounding cities, ones similar ours, and determine if the study made a significant difference in their neighborhoods. Just because others are doing it, does not mean that it is the right thing for Culver City. Our codes have worked for years. We need to take a look at the properties that have been built in the Carlson Park area and determine what changes to the codes need to be made based on those properties, so that we do not allow the same mistakes to be made again. Is spending hundreds of thousands on a study going to give us the holy grail of all zoning codes. I doubt it. Is this something that the city cannot figure out on their own through the Planning Department. Maybe we should look at that department and what we are paying them to do.

LEE: I think it would be good to get an outside study of our zoning codes but we should make every effort to insure that that study is actually independent and not just outside. We should be wary of studies done in areas or by firms that are real estate or industry focused and don't strike the proper balance between community concerns and physical data. Too often these studies do not strike the proper balance and there is inherent bias in the simple act of choosing which firm to do the study. But, if a truly independent study and firm can be agreed upon it would not only help further advancement of issues around housing but potentially open the door to consider zoning regulations around environmental issues such as the Inglewood Oil Field and provide framework to rewrite our general plan.

SAHLI-WELLS: Absolutely – I voted for the consultant, and will ensure the necessary funding is approved – see response above.

SMALL: The engagement of an outside consultant to study and make recommendations on the design guidelines for neighborhoods is an excellent investment for Culver City and will be in our

long-term financial interest. We need to do careful research on how other cities have solved these problems, or failed to solve them, and study the neighborhoods themselves, while reaching out to survey the residents to learn about their views and desires in regard to these issues.

TIGGS: First, I am compelled to give an observation then I will directly answer the question. What amazes me after all the energy was spent on the staff surveying what other cities do, the trends in Carlson Park and other areas, the open projects, Planning Commission Meetings and multiple study sessions (including the City Council), the Council now wants to hire an outside consultant. I have mixed feelings on engaging a consultant if city staff can get the job done. If staff can't efficiently get the job done or is too biased to seriously consider proposed solutions for residents then yes an outside consultant would be in the best interests in tackling this ongoing issue.

- 4. If you support the hiring of an independent outside consulting firm, would feel one of their main responsibilities would be to work with residents of each neighborhood to develop a thorough proposal for each neighborhood that maintains the character of that neighborhood as neighborhood renewal takes place?**

ERIKSSON: Yes. It will be critical to work closely with residents of each neighborhood because all neighborhoods are not the same. Some neighborhoods call out for more density, while others call out for less. Live/work space makes sense in some places, but not in others. The only way to define our vision for the future is to work closely with each neighborhood and craft a planning document that addresses each neighborhood in a unique way.

GARACOCHEA: I am not totally sold on the hiring of a firm. If it were to pass though, I would want each neighborhood to have a representative designated to work with them. I would also want a builder or opposition assigned to the team as well. We would need to have a balance from both sides. One set of ideas or plans for the future is not always the best.

LEE: Yes, as I mentioned in the comment above the major concern I would have is the actual level of independence of the firm and their track record with encouraging true community involvement that shapes the final appearance of new regulations or standards.

SAHLI-WELLS: Absolutely. Community engagement is key to the success of this process. Here, I must note that I am not willing to regulate building style. As taste is completely subjective, and changes over time, I will not support "style" guidelines. I believe that the diversity of our housing stock is key to our charm and indeed a healthy part of neighborhood character. However, building footprint, relationship to neighboring homes, parkways, setbacks, etc. all need to be considered and revised in this process. These are the determining factors in neighborhood character we need to protect.

SMALL: This is precisely what I support and will work to make happen as a City Council Member. I can rally tremendous support for this approach from the architecture and design community.

TIGGS: Yes. The residents have to have an active voice in the proposals as they are effected the most and have more to lose if this is done without seriously considering their input.

5. **Culver City has already officially defined the boundaries of its respective neighborhoods, and in recent study sessions quantitatively defined the differences of each. Do you support establishing zoning codes on a residential neighborhood by neighborhood basis to replace the current single, city-wide codes?**

ERIKSSON: That is one possible outcome of the review process. In any event, I believe, as written above, the only way to define our vision for the future is to work closely with each neighborhood and craft a planning document that addresses each neighborhood in a unique way. That may mean different zoning, but it could also mean the same zoning with different design overlays or guidelines governing future development.

GARACOCHEA: I do support the separation of neighborhoods, although, as the city begins to evolve into the future the separation may not be as great of a difference as it is now. As the homes become larger and reflect the current times, the separation may not be needed for the majority of the city. There will always be separation when comparing the obvious, Crest vs East End, but maybe not when talking about Carlson Park vs East End in the not so far future.

LEE: I think this is an issue that needs further consideration. Our neighborhoods are different and to some degree a different zoning code for each neighborhood would make sense (some are more heavily commercial or industrial, some only residential, many mixed) but I would be in favor of establishing minimum zoning regulations for each area in an effort to make sure that no neighborhood gets less than full consideration of their needs or short shrift and then establish neighborhood specific regulations after the minimums are established.

SAHLI-WELLS: We need regulations that address our unique neighborhoods. For planning purposes, there may be ways to determine broader categories which could transcend a single neighborhood while still remaining responsive to individual neighborhood needs. I would task the consultant with proposing a practical zoning approach. I am certainly open to “neighborhood by neighborhood” codes if needed, and am also highly critical of the blanket rules we have in place now.

SMALL: Absolutely.

TIGGS: No. What I do support is refining the existing citywide zoning code to bring it up to date. From there I would strongly encourage the city invest the time and expense with active participation with the residents to develop design guidelines that make sense for the particular area. This is a lot of work but with active community participation we can come up with guidelines that can prevent some of the mansion developments that are out of place for the neighborhood. Design guidelines could achieve similar results as area by area zoning and be accomplished in a more efficient and cost effective manner in my opinion. I am open to listening to reasons why area by area zoning would be better, but my initial observation is it would take way too much time vs. focusing on design guideline (similar to the Gateway Area).

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6. **How do you respond to some developers’ claims that large homes are a substantial benefit to surrounding property values and the city through increased property tax revenue? (Per the 2015 Annual Financial Report: “Property taxes only account for about 3.5% to 4.5% of General Fund revenues.”)**

ERIKSSON: Culver City derives relatively little of its General Fund income from property taxes compared to other sources of revenue. I do believe that larger homes naturally increase property values, but only if they exist within the character of the surrounding neighborhood. That is, a 3,000-square-foot home built adjacent to a neighborhood of 2,500-square-foot homes could have a positive impact on property values. However, that same 3,000-square-foot home built adjacent to a neighborhood of 1,500-square-foot homes will simply be out of place.

GARACOCHEA: I would agree with the builders, that number is only going to climb as the properties get more expensive. I have one of the nicer homes on my block. I would like to see some large homes developed in my neighborhood because I know that it would only increase the value of my home. I would also like to compare our property tax revenues to Santa Monica's revenues for a comparison. It may shed some light on this issue and give Culver City something to aim for. As our population grows and the city evolves, housing is going to become more and more expensive.

LEE: I think that this is merely a talking point most of the city's revenue comes from entertainment, tech and very largely retail. What high home values have done and what I have heard from walking is drive long time residents (many who rent) away from Culver City. Having high home values is not a detriment if we make sure that families who live in Culver and the children of these families can actually afford to continue to love here. And to do so we need a combination of building regulations, adequate compensation from employers and some greater allocation of affordable housing.

SAHLI-WELLS: Unfortunately, since the 1970's when Prop 13 was passed, Culver City has been a "low property tax" city. This doesn't mean residents and property owners pay less in property taxes than others, it just means the city receives only a fraction of the money from property taxes compared to other cities. It was a terrible decision the city is locked into. As a result, property taxes are a very small portion of our city's budget. Large homes may also negatively affect neighboring property values.

SMALL: Excellent design and quality construction can be beneficial to a neighborhood and some homeowners might consider rising property values in the area surrounding their home to be advantageous. But this is not a reason to give developers uncontrolled carte-blanche to build overly-large homes that may not be appropriate and beneficial to the neighborhood and community at large. The property tax revenue from these projects is not a factor that has a significant impact on the General Fund.

TIGGS: I have seen these report and discuss with various realtors. It is true the property tax increment is relatively nominal when it comes to funding our general fund. I believe we are losing sight when we only focus on building bigger brings in more revenue. Our city is what it is because of a lot of great things (i.e. schools, parks, small-town feel, etc.) however the glue that keeps things together is the residents. If elected this will remain my focus. Clearly, mansionization is a hot topic and for a very good reason. Residents in Carlson Park more particularly are seeing it on a daily basis. What troubles me while walking and speaking to residents is the sheer fear anytime a neighbor's house is sold (i.e. who will be buying it—a developer or owner occupier...will it be torn down and if so will it be a massive structure blocking my sunlight or invade my privacy). This being

said if elected I will champion a middle ground that allows reasonable development but takes into account the character of the neighborhood.

- 7. As you may be aware, there has been a record number of permits approved and submitted recently for homes above 3,000 sf, many of which are yet to start construction? Would you support an immediate temporary moratorium on issuing permits to homes of a certain size, say above a .5 FAR (approximately twice that of average current Culver City house) until the independent outside study is completed and its recommendations acted upon?**

ERIKSSON: I am not in favor of a moratorium because the people who purchased those homes and are looking to improve them did so based on the existing set of “rules” – the General Plan and the planning documents that govern development. What we must do immediately is revisit those rules and change them so that everyone living in Culver City or purchasing a home here in the future does so understanding the development vision we have for our city.

GARACOCHEA: I would not support an immediate temporary moratorium. Families have invested a lot of money into building the home of their dreams. I also understand that investors have also purchased some of the lots in Culver City to build on as well. Again, we should look at what the Planning Department is doing to justify the plans they are approving. The study may take years to complete and we cannot delay people from doing as they wish to their property. However, again it should be within the codes.

LEE: I would be in favor of such a moratorium.

SAHLI-WELLS: I voted for a moratorium for homes over 3,000 sf. Now that we’ve moved forward with our initial regulations, and have approved hiring a consultant, I’m not sure that a moratorium is still necessary. However, I am willing to consider it.

SMALL: I want to study this issue more carefully and compare this type of moratorium explicitly with other moratoriums on specific types of projects that the city has chosen to limit in the past, such as massage parlors, etc. But in theory, I support a temporary moratorium as described in the question here above.

TIGGS: Yes. I said this at the beginning of the controversy then I changed my mind thinking the council resolved the matter to the satisfaction of the residents. I say yes as what has happened is during the waiting period projects are popping up on a pretty regular basis. This only throws “salt on the wound”. Most Carson Park residents are reasonable in recognizing projects that have received approval can’t be stopped, however, there should be a reasonable pause until the independent study is completed and recommendations are acted upon.

- 8. During the “mansionization” discussion in 2015 with the Planning Commission and City Council, the public’s only opportunity to be formally heard in public was limited to two and three minute comments at the head of each meeting. If you do not feel this is sufficient, specifically how would you work to better engage the residents of Culver City in this discussion?**

ERIKSSON: I would engage the public and representatives from each neighborhood as partners with a seat at the table as we go through our General Plan line by line and examine ways to improve it and make it more responsive to today's environment. These are critical documents, and the public should have a say in how they are revised. I also think we can learn from other cities and adopt best practices for how they have handled similar conflicts in their neighborhoods.

GARACOCHEA: I feel as though the public's input is very important in any discussion with the city, the city is not always right. We are all human and have our own thoughts and beliefs, but they are not always right. Personally, I like to think of myself as very open minded and I value another person's opinion and thoughts. Through my life, I have learned that you can learn a lot by just listening and not talking. But how do you manage the time allowed when individuals are very passionate about a topic? I would suggest a designate spoke person for every 10 people and give that person a 10-15 minute time frame to present the case. I have attended those meetings and while everyone is very passionate about their individual experience, most of them are the same stories. The 10 individuals can work together and construct an informative presentation, with solutions, in that amount of time. This would save on average 20 minutes per 10 people.

LEE: I think because of the large number of people who would like to comment 2-3 minutes per person is actually reasonable. However, if an issue encourages such a large and passionate response I would be in favor of allotting more time either at a different planning commission or city council meeting or holding a special meeting whose subject matter would be limited to just one subject. Then of course allowing for email and written comments of a longer nature. However, I believe that the best way to air an issue out so that the community has a chance to fully comment is at an official city meeting and if an issue warrants the time I believe that allotting more time and/or more meetings that are specific to the particular issue would be the way to fully cover it and allow a chance for widespread participation. For the development that was completed last year on Tilden Place there were three public meetings on that issue alone. For an issue that seems to have captivated such a large portion of the city on either side it feels appropriate to have a similar amount of chances for all stakeholders to voice their opinions in an official manner.

SAHLI-WELLS: The consultant will propose strategies for engaging the public. I will direct them to provide a setting and format which fosters maximum public input. This includes the ability for community members to ask questions and receive answers, rather than having limited public speaking time. This must not be a workshop in name only, or take a bottom-down approach, but instead it must create the ability for true community dialog.

SMALL: This should certainly be part of the research study conducted by the outside consultant. I would also support Town Hall type meetings, public conferences, panel discussions, and visioning forums on these issues. These issues are tremendously important to the future of Culver City and it is imperative that the community and the public be engaged in the discussion to the fullest extent possible.

TIGGS: My vision would be a two (2) step process. Staff would organize and conduct community meetings to get the community input on a regular basis during the process. This would give the community information on how the process is going with the consultant. This would help significantly insofar as when the final report is issued the community will not be "blind sighted" on findings/recommendations. Second, I would entertain increasing the time to five minutes. This

time increase may actually not be necessary if the community decided to assign a spokesperson(s) for X amount of residents, hence giving more time to voice the resident's views in a unified voice.

TIGGS: Conclusion: I have said throughout my campaign whatever is decided by this Council or the new Council will not make everyone happy. However, if elected I will give more weight to the concerns of the residents. I personally have the sense while acknowledging the hard work of planning and the commission that the mansionization can has been kicked down the road for too long. Clearly the process was rushed and still not really complete. While the FARs will help it is an incomplete solution. There is nothing we can do to come up with subjective designs that are agreeable to all stakeholders, however we can and should focus now on design guidelines that fine tune the new FARs, etc. to come closer to a more complete solution.
