



2022 Mayoral & City Council Elections Candidate Questionnaire

Topic: Sonoma-Marín Fairgrounds Lease Extension

Issued by the Friends of the Sonoma-Marín Fairgrounds

The candidates elected in the 2022 Petaluma Mayoral and City Council elections will make decisions that have the potential to dramatically impact the future of the Sonoma-Marín Fairgrounds. The Friends of the Sonoma-Marín Fairgrounds do not endorse candidates, but we believe Petaluma residents deserve to know where candidates stand on the key issues surrounding the future of their Fairgrounds.

*Please respond thoroughly to each of these questions. When you finish, please send your responses to friendsofsmfairgrounds@gmail.com by **September 5, 2022**. Your responses will be shared on our website and with the greater community.*

Candidate Name: John Shribbs

District/Seat: Petaluma City Council for District 2

1. What does the fairgrounds mean to you and your community?

The SM Fairgrounds has provided summer fun in the form of fireworks, carnivals, music festivals, car races, and agricultural fairs. It is also the park and ride to the airport and good spot to join carpools. It also provides space for several smaller operations such as a school, dog training, paint ball, car sales and shows, and food trucks. One of the most important functions has been serving as the evacuation center during past wildfires. The SM Fairgrounds is a place for large crowds to congregate for fun.

2. What are your favorite and least favorite aspects of the fairgrounds?

The agricultural fair and fireworks have been my favorite activities to join in the communal fun. Much of the community loves the carnival, races, and music events. My least favorite aspect is the outrageous noise levels coming from car races and music events. While participants love these loud events, most of the citizens are annoyed, some extremely. Over time the noise level has increased in volume and frequency and heard from miles away.

The other aspect that is of concern is the low level of use by the entire community as seen in the many days of vacancy of the land. This land is now in the center of our city, not in the outskirts when it was built, and it needs a new vision of use for our future.

3. Describe your understanding of the history of the fairgrounds and how important it is to protect the history, heritage and traditions the fairgrounds has contributed to the community over the past 112 years?

The historical culture of the land is use as an agricultural fair, its original intent, and it is very important we keep this aspect of the fairgrounds, especially since our economy is still based on food production, including newer products of beer, wine, horticulture crops, and cannabis. Over time the carnival rides and music stages took over and dominated the annual fair. I have visited the site several times and the agricultural structures lay empty, unused most of the year. As an agricultural scientist with a PhD in Horticulture, I have been disappointed in this priority shift. I want to see the agriculture demonstration turned into a year-round demonstration so all our children can tour the facility and learn where our food comes from and invigorate more support for local agriculture and inspire new farmers.

4. What is your vision for the future of the fairgrounds over the next 50 to 100 years?

The agricultural fair not only needs to continue, but made year-round so students of all ages, K through college, not only visit the site and learn farming but also become participants and get inspired to become farmers and gardeners producing local and at home food. The 4th AA could also maintain management of the annual fair as they have been doing so they have income to manage the agricultural unit.

Music, racing, and sports could all be done in a modern, sliding roof arena with soundproof walls and transformable flooring and seating, and this would also act as our emergency and evacuation center. Since climate change is forcing the reduction of gas consumption cars, all racing must convert to electric and human powered vehicles to promote this new paradigm. The noise level coming off the site will be minimized, and all outdoor events will have limits of noise emissions.

The open grounds will be used as a tree filled park open year-round and also convertible to evacuation living space when needed. The annual carnival could also operate on these open spaces.

The buildings are all getting old and needing overhauling or replacing so we need to find new homes for current operations while we renovate the entire site. Assuming relocations are successful, we can then envision new uses for all these properties. This is the new center of our city, and we can reimagine it to be our cultural and administrative center as well. Downtown would remain the business center and social center. This would open up the option of converting the current city hall to housing and operations rebuilt on the fairgrounds with police and fire also housed in a complex.

Everyone needs to get to the airport so the Airport Express needs to either stay or move to the transit hub by the SMART train. The next-door shopping center parking lot could be used for park and ride carpooling to keep that functionality.

Several other options have been proposed such as housing, People's Village, and large open space tree filled community park. These are options on the table for discussion as we develop a new vision.

5. What are the positives and negatives associated with the 4th District Agricultural Association (a state agency comprised of local state appointees) managing the fairgrounds property?

The burden of management of the property has been taken by the 4th AA, which has taken pressure off of city staff. This has been a benefit for over 100 years. Most of the activities, events and money now come from nonagricultural enterprises. The Association is now a landlord of an event center earning millions of dollars from these nonagricultural sources. Not having a long-term lease has stymied any future planning and construction. Who will be in control of future plans? The current situation is unacceptable. We need to create a new vision for our new paradigm and either the Association or the City needs to be in control of this direction long term.

6. The city has hired *Healthy Democracy* to engage the community in shaping the future of the fairgrounds. How should the city use the information gained from this expensive and lengthy process?

Listening is extremely important to know the values and attitudes of the citizens. Most of the discussion has been based on the past and current situation. This discussion has created a rift, but we can refocus the discussion on future needs and create a vision of what is possible. We are moving into a new paradigm with climate change happening right now and we need a new vision. I am hoping the current process creates a new vision.

7. At what point should the future of the fairgrounds be determined by an official vote of the residents of Petaluma?

The purpose of City Council is to listen to the citizens and to lead us into the future. The city is the owner of the property and needs to reshape it. The current process is gathering the people's opinions and desires. No vote is necessary. It is the job of the City Council to listen and lead into the future and make the decisions needed.

8. The 4th DAA represents all of Marin & Sonoma Counties. How much input should the extended community from outside of Petaluma have on the fairground's future?

Outside community does visit the site and provide large amounts of revenue and taxes when they visit, so they should have a voice and we do need to understand consequences and repercussions. We will need to balance the regional functionality of the site with the local needs as we create a new future.

9. How do you see the 4th DAA and the City of Petaluma working together to shape and protect the fairgrounds for future generations?

Yes. The 4th DAA needs to keep doing its function, but on a smaller part of the property, the agricultural functionality. That is their mission. The rest of the property is not used for agriculture and should be under city management.

10. Currently there are 9 permanent tenants and dozens of interim renters leasing fairgrounds property 52 weeks a year. These include schools, public services, non-profits, private businesses, raceway, farmers market, etc. Where do they fit into your vision for the fairgrounds and what obligation does the city have to mitigate negative impacts caused by an uncertain future and this lengthy outreach process?

These operations can continue whether the site is under 4th AA control or under city control. This property does need redevelopment like many other cities have done to their center and the fairground is now our physical city center. Their future on site has always been uncertain under past management so that does not change. Restructuring the site will take time and we can create opportunities for current tenants. This may even include construction of new buildings for them.

11. Should the footprint or orientation of the fairground's property change and why?

Several plans have been drawn up by architects with the 4th Ag Assoc. and many people have proposed new uses. Once the property is split, keeping the ag station in place and functioning year-round, we can then reconsider the entire other part of the site with a new vision.

12. Since 1961 the Petaluma Speedway has operated in the fairground's grandstands on roughly 25-30 nights a year. What is your vision for the Petaluma Speedway over the next 50 to 100 years?

Climate Change is happening right now. It is over 110 F as I write this survey, a new record. This is our new paradigm, and we need to act now. New gas combustion cars will be banned by 2035. We need to convert to electric and human powered vehicles and hybrids. We need to rebuild an arena to support this new paradigm. We can give the gas combustion races a timeline to end so operations can continue for the time being. The city has become a leader in climate change actions banning new gas stations, so to be consistent, gas combustion racing also needs to diminish. We need to end our love affair with the gasoline engine and move forward into the future.

13. At times of natural disasters and public health emergencies, the fairgrounds serve as the city's largest and most flexible public safety resource. Should the city decide to end the lease with the 4th DAA and change the properties use, how should the city account for these lost public safety services for people and animals?

Not lost. The city would do an even better job of creating an evacuation and emergency space, which we will definitely need many times in the near future. Public safety is our number one concern and part of the city mission. This question is biased as written.

14. Knowing a secure future is essential for long-term financial investment into any property, if you are in favor of a lease extension for the 4th DAA on the existing fairgrounds property, what length of lease would you advocate for and why?

I would like to see the fairgrounds split into two parts, one with a long term 20-year lease cycle to the Association to run the agricultural fair and year-round agricultural farm and ag based interpretive center. This is their historical mission, to promote agriculture. They can work with partners such as SRJC, PHS, 4-H, Future Farmers, and local Ag leaders to develop a new vision of future agriculture which will include vineyards, horticulture crops, and cannabis as well as current dairy, hay and equestrian operations.

The city needs to take control of management of the remaining part of the property and develop it into a city center used by all. This may or may not include housing. The city council and staff can work on future plans with the citizens, which is their mission.

Building and managing of the arena with multiple venues of racing, music, and sports could be contracted out to an organization that can build and manage this modern arena.

15. Is there anything else you would like the community to know about your views on the fairgrounds?

The current situation is unacceptable. Noise levels have created a toxic atmosphere, literally. The buildings are aging and needing repair and replacement. Now is the time to create a new vision for this property that retains the key functionality and history as well as a city center of our future. The purpose of the current process is to create this new vision of what is needed for our future. Once we have a vision, then we can take next steps of which organization is best suited to manage the various parts of the SM Fairgrounds.