



2022 Mayoral & City Council Elections

Candidate Questionnaire

Topic: Sonoma-Marin Fairgrounds Lease Extension

Issued by the Friends of the Sonoma-Marin 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-Marin Fairgrounds. The Friends of the Sonoma-Marin 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: Robert Conklin

District/Seat: Petaluma City Council District 3

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

Some of my oldest memories happened at the Fairgrounds, and I have deep respect for what it means to different members of our community (both in and outside of city limits). I've been going to the races and the Fair for as long as I can remember. Before it closed, I spent countless pounds of quarters at the Dodge City arcade. As a teenager, I won a ribbon for a photography project I entered in the Fair.

Today, I attend the races almost every week. Some of the racers I grew up watching – like Shawn McCoy and Sparky Howard – still race. To be blunt: I am part of the racetrack's multi-generation community that many people speak of. The same stories I shared with my father; I now share with my son. It means a lot to me.

I am keenly aware of the education that radiates from the Fairgrounds and the Fair. Hundreds of young people work on 4-H projects that they showcase at the Fair. I personally volunteer with Petaluma High School Auto Shop helping the students work on projects that they enter in the Fair.

To me and other long-time Petalumans, the Fairgrounds is the heart of Petaluma. If elected to the council, my goal is to not compromise the traditions and activities that so many love while also incorporating new activities that drastically increase the number of people that have a strong attachment to the site. I want everyone in Petaluma to have a personal attachment to the site, and I want it to continue being a place where we celebrate our ag history and traditions. There is plenty of space to add new used without getting rid of existing uses.

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

Favorite:

My favorite aspect of the fairgrounds is detailed above. It is the history of the site, and the traditions that have been continued at the site over many generations. Many other fairgrounds have closed for good, but not

Petaluma's. Many people say that people are moving here and trying to change Petaluma, but I disagree. I think people move here because we have not lost our long-time traditions. We have found a way to become hip, but still have a fairgrounds, racetrack, and several operational mills and creameries in our city. The fairgrounds is a major reason why we've been able to "have our cake and eat it too" with respect to. I love this town, and I love the fairgrounds.

My least favorite aspect of the fairgrounds has been the general silence from the current council with respect to their vision for the space, and the divisiveness that has come about because of the lease ending and no vision being in place. We say that the city and the 4DAA should work together, but the council has been cryptic about its intentions and the 4DAA has been largely focused securing a long-term lease.

We need the sole focus to be the vision for the fairgrounds, and how we bring that vision to life. From my view, the current city manager (Peggy Flynn) is doing her best to engage the public, but without the city council being clear about where they stand and driving the dialogue, the process does not feel as genuine as it would if the city council was more engaging and inclusive of the larger fairgrounds community. The city council needs to be transparent and collaborative—with the 4DAA, Petaluma residents, and the larger fairgrounds community.

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?

As I said in my response to question 1, the multi-generational activities and continued focus on agriculture is a major reason why we have been able to balance becoming hip without killing off the roots/traditions that define Petaluma. Petaluma will continue to grow and change, but by continuing to highlight our history and traditions at the fairgrounds, we can grow and change, but not lose our soul. Fighting change is not the answer. We need to accept that change will happen, so that we can intentionally welcome change and not let it compromise our traditions.

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

50 years is a long time. 100 years is twice as long. I do not think the people who were part of the fairgrounds 112 years ago knew what it would become and I'm not going to pretend that I know. My vision is that it continues to facilitate the multi-generational past times it has for the last 50-100 years, and in the process creates new past times that become multi-generational past times. It should evolve to serve the community's needs, and at the same time keep us connected to who we have always been.

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 4DAA has managed the site for my entire life, so I owe countless memories to the 4DAA. Also, the 4DAA has done a good job of representing the larger fairgrounds community that extends beyond city limits. If elected to the council, I would be more welcoming to the 4DAA's participation than the current and past council's have been because they represent a huge part of our community that the city council does not.

The primary drawback of the 4DAA is that, just as the city council is not tapped into the larger fairgrounds community that lives outside of city limits, the 4DAA is not well-tapped into the needs of people living in town. There are countless ways that the fairgrounds could help provide activities for different age groups and interests, but to date they have not been capitalized on. The 4DAA has said that the lack of long-term lease is

the reason for this, but in my opinion that is not an acceptable answer. Whoever is managing the property needs to be actively working with our schools and senior center, Petaluma Peoples Services Center, and other community organizations to serve the needs of the people who live in town, just as much as they serve the needs of people who live outside of city limits.

In my opinion, “working together” means that the city, 4DAA, schools and community organizations all recognize that each has unique role to fill in representing the community, and they all work together to do what is best for the community.

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?

The Healthy Democracy process was costly, but it is not the end all be all. The most valuable aspect of Healthy Democracy’s process is that for the first time we heard from many different groups and community members (who were not political appointees) deliberated about the future. There were a few definitive outcomes, but mostly it indicated that the community has a lot of ideas. We should take seriously the definitive outcomes of the process and focus the next phase on trying many of the new ideas that surfaced during that process.

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

I am not clear what would be voted on. The Healthy Democracy process made it loud and clear that people do not want to see the site bulldozed, carved up and sold off to the highest bidder. It also made it clear that people want to see improvements and new activities. There is no binary choice, so would be voted on?

Instead of this rhetoric, we need to welcome the messiness of visioning, public process, and trial and error. If I am on the city council, voters will not need to worry about knowing where I stand. If you want to vote on/for the future of the fairgrounds, vote for me this November.

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?

While I live inside city limits, I grew up just beyond the city limit line and I have many close friends that live in the county who love the fairgrounds. I know that even if you do not live inside city limits, Petaluma is your community. We are all part of the same community, the 4DAA has been a primary voice of representation for the rural members of our community. Thus, as stated above, the 4DAA has an important role to play in representing the larger fairgrounds community. It is a core role that they need to play in the visioning and master planning process.

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

Above I referenced the need for different groups like the city, 4DAA, and schools to work together. This needs to happen. If elected, I would be more open with the 4DAA that the current and past councils have been. Initially, I’d keep the focus on the fairgrounds vision and activities, believing that by working together on the vision and activities we can fore a healthier working relationship. The beauty of electing me is that no one can question where my heart is, and that is what builds bridges for good partnerships.

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?

This process started a decade late and there is no plan for the site after the lease ends. The subtenants should not pay the price for the city and the 4DAA not having a plan. I think we need a five-year lease extension so that we ease the pressure everyone feels about the near term and can focus on the vision, and trying new ideas. Some of the new ideas may not be compatible with other uses (existing and new), so tough decisions will need to be made. These tough decisions should not be rushed, and if a tough decision is going to impact an existing tenant, that tenant deserves time and assistance from the city in making alternative arrangements.

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

I cannot see a future where nothing changes at the fairgrounds. Some of the buildings need so much maintenance that it might be better to tear them down and start fresh. If we are going to spend millions of dollars on upgrades, we should consider if and how things should change.

One community need I am particularly aware of is that our police and fire need a modern, centrally located facility to maintain acceptable response times. A small portion of the fairgrounds, possible across from the Library, could provide that space.

Again, I less concerned about change as a concept, and more concerned about making sure that as we change, we do not lose the things we love. That will be my focus on the council.

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?

As I said above, I love Petaluma Speedway. Other candidates may say "I am fine with the speedway," but I am the only candidate that actually goes there every Saturday night and is part of Petaluma's racing community. It should not be a surprise to anyone that I want the track to continue being part of our city into the future.

In terms of how it changes, we will eventually see all racing go electric. The cars are faster and as prices come down we will see this become the norm. When we transition, the noise will go away. I realize this is not what many who do not like the track want to hear, but I hope those folks understand just how much the track means to me.

I also see the track becoming much more of a multi-purpose space. It is largely unused during the week. The ideas floated about putting a small go cart or BMX track in the infield are great ideas to continue the tradition of racing while attracting new users to the site. It fits very well with what I said above about making new people fall in love with the fairgrounds (and in this case, the racetrack). It would be awesome to have young people from across Sonoma and Marin counties coming to Petaluma on a regular basis to ride our BMX track. It fits with the growing community of young people that are into extreme sports (Mina Stress, etc.). The track's proximity to the SMART train could help increase SMART ridership too.

I also think we should start having music at the racetrack again. If we open/increase public access to other areas of the fairgrounds, the racetrack could become the year-round event center that can charge for entry.

Bottom line: the Petaluma Speedway is very much part of my vision for the fairgrounds. If getting rid of the track is your number one priority for Petaluma, I am not your candidate.

13. At times of natural disasters and public health emergencies, the fairgrounds serves as the cities 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?

I have volunteered with NorCal Livestock Evacuation for every fire that has burned in our area. In 2020, I was on the ballot for city council but did not really run a campaign because I was evacuating animals. I have taken hundreds of Animals to Petaluma Fairgrounds. These fires showed a totally new and invaluable use for fairgrounds. There is no future scenario that I could support that does not place emergency response and community resilience as a primary need.

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?

It is hard to visionary when we are operating from a place of fear, uncertainty, and risk. That is why I support a five-year lease extension so that we can focus on the opportunity before us: creating a vision that does right by our past and our future. During this time, the city and the 4DAA can build a healthier relationship and figure out how to best manage the property as partners. If I am elected, you can count on me to show up in good faith trying to find a solution that does right by everyone, whether you live in city limits or in the county.

This is a very complicated topic. Combining complexity and urgency generally do not lead to the best decisions. I am skeptical of anyone who says the city should provide a long-term lease OR the city should take the lease back immediately because they are not focused on the vision and what is best for the community—which in my opinion should be the sole focus right now.

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

In my 2018 campaign, I was approached about supporting a large hotel and flashy conference center at the Fairgrounds. The person who approached me was working with people who were/are already on the council, and they were looking for support from me as a prerequisite to supporting my candidacy. That person did not end up supporting my candidacy and neither did the councilmember they were/are working with. The lesson I learned is that there has been no shortage of backroom conversations about what should become of the fairgrounds, and developers are licking their chops about the idea of getting to purchase 50+ acres of prime real estate.