



# 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](mailto:friendsofsmfairgrounds@gmail.com) by September 5, 2022. Your responses will be shared on our website and with the greater community.*

**Susan Kirks**

Candidate Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**Mayor of Petaluma**

District/Seat: \_\_\_\_\_

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

The fairgrounds represent large acreage centrally located in Petaluma. This is clearly an important property for the community of Petaluma. Many Petalumans have fond memories of participating in the annual Sonoma-Marin Fair and feel this is an important part of Petaluma's history and future.

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

My favorite part of the Fairgrounds is the expansive acreage and open area in Petaluma. I do not have a least favorite aspect. I know that many may feel the favorite part of the Fairgrounds would be the annual fair itself, but for me this large acreage that has remained so open for the most part for so long with different and varied "uses" is the actual most relevant part and my favorite part. Acreage like this that is open in a City of 60,000+ population can be considered rare.

#### 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?

I'd like to respond to this question by saying, first, there is a great deal of tension around the last at least 10 years of the Fairgrounds use, the question about the lease expiring, the very ineffective City of Petaluma ad hoc committee process with the Fair Board, and general anxiety that is very clear at the present time. I just want to acknowledge that because, of course, the City of Petaluma history includes significant reliance upon and profit from animal agriculture and activities

associated with that. I do understand the agricultural connection to and relationship with the Fairgrounds. The associated rides, food and other attractions affiliated with the annual Fair are enjoyed by many from Petaluma and outside Petaluma. It's just recently that many have learned about the multitude of activities, fundraisers and events that occur at the Fairgrounds, which is very helpful to know. I also understand there are different opinions about the Speedway and that the Speedway and races are an integral part of the history at the Fairgrounds and many in Petaluma want to preserve the Speedway and activities there while the last 2-3 years in particular have revealed those in Petaluma who want to close the Speedway and all that is affiliated with it, except for a call to transition to electric car racing if racing is to continue there.

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

I am interested in listening to input from all Petalumans, city residents and rural residents, especially those who care deeply about the Fairgrounds property and have a relationship with the Fairgrounds. It would be very presumptuous of me to give a personal vision of the Fairgrounds for the next 50-100 years. I will share what I feel certain about. Petaluma is geographically located such that we need to be receptive to and helpful for our neighbors in Sonoma and Marin Counties as an emergency evacuation center. This needs to be very sizable, well managed, with ongoing planning and preparation, and accommodate humans and animals. We do not know what types of climate-related extreme weather events or wildfires will come our way each year - but we do know there will be these events. And I believe our Fairgrounds are a high priority location to be maintained as and prioritized as an emergency evacuation center.

I also believe locating a new, sustainably designed civic center to accommodate City Hall, the main Police Station and the main Fire Station (with the downtown Fire Station then being designated as a branch) is in the greater community's interest - to locate City government centrally in Petaluma. But, I also support locating this close to Washington Street and in an area accessible to main areas of transit and transportation, not taking up the Fairgrounds space where there is the open acreage. Planning and completing this process would open up three locations for redevelopment of mixed use, affordable residential housing - where the current City Hall is located on English Street, where the current Police Station is on Petaluma Blvd. North, and where the old Fire Station on D Street will have been. We need to be looking at existing impacted areas in Petaluma for redevelopment for housing opportunities, not taking up what little open space remains for that purpose.

I would support what I believe most Petalumans want - which is for the Fair to remain as a primary historic activity in south Sonoma County - at the Fairgrounds. Because of my personal values, and I want to be honest about this, I believe a bridge can be created to expand and accommodate new opportunities as part of the Fair, such as welcoming displays for farmed animal sanctuaries, so members of the public and young people can learn about this important reality, as well as new educational programs such as LEAP, Leaders for Ethics, Animals and the Planet. This bridge to new opportunities related to farmed animals, sanctuaries and education would give young people new opportunities for those who want to embrace different ways of interacting with animals and land. For the community members who have longstanding ties to and relationship with farming and ranching, using animals, that tradition would be able to continue. I believe this path is one that is a moderate expansion and could then find its own course over time.

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

Brian Barnacle of the City Council recently suggested a year's extension of the lease with the 4<sup>th</sup> District Agricultural Association Board managing the Fairgrounds. I would support this and think that the politics in Petaluma, and the dysfunction that has clearly become a norm related to the relationship between the Fair Board and the City needs to be better understood and addressed. A well composed and agreed upon lease agreement following an extension could address whatever negatives have been perceived to exist. The Mayor and City Council have a responsibility to support what is best for the greater Petaluma community and that includes a functional relationship with whomever will be involved in use of and management of part of or all of the Fairgrounds.

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?

One of the disadvantages of any process like Healthy Democracy in Petaluma is the existing dysfunction of and distrust of Petaluma City Government, and for good reason. It is my understanding use of Healthy Democracy and the process brought to Petaluma was suggested to the City Manager by an elected Council member, and this process was then explored and initiated. It does seem as though the community members who have participated in this process have enjoyed the process, but I can definitely understand, after viewing the reports to date, the general feeling of angst about this related both to the process itself and to the expense, which I agree was substantial and, to date, I am not able to say yet that it was justified. I personally know that two longstanding organizations I lead were excluded from even being invited to participate as groups in the process while other groups were invited to participate, and this was via the decision of City Management - which already reflects a bias and exclusion. This is wrong. I'm waiting to see what the outcome is for the next report that is provided. I participated in the one gathering at Lucchesi Community Center and did enjoy talking with some of the panelists at some of the tables. But, even there, it was clear the invested various interests in Petaluma were at this gathering, with rather loud voices. The health and safety protocols for that gathering were not adequate and I made sure to depart as soon as the event was over and to maintain a good social distance and be masked. One of the facilitators contracted COVID and another community member also tested positive for COVID shortly after this event. I think most can agree a process has been needed and is overdue to explore the future of the Fairgrounds and the relationship between the Fair Board and the City, but I remain unclear about the high expense as well as the process itself as Healthy Democracy continues the facilitating and reporting. I hope for everyone's sake that some reasonable pathway that will serve the greater community may be identified. I do believe the expense for this group was high and that a well managed City with effective Mayor and City Council might have created a community-centered communication and decision process for less expense. We shall see what the outcome will be from this process.

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

One of the best things that could occur in our City is in this next election to ensure voters elect a Mayor and City Council members who demonstrate that they are in the "race" in order to serve all of Petaluma to the best of our ability. We have had two groups in Petaluma basically fighting it

out for all of the years I have lived here – and one group is generally trying to best the other group for control of the City Council and City Government. We need honesty and transparency in City Government. That also comes with the role of City Management and City Legal Advice. We do not have that here in Petaluma, and we do need it. The community needs clear and effective leadership from the Mayor and members of the City Council. I believe this is possible, but I also believe voters need to really examine backgrounds and determine who is running for office who will be informed, fair-minded, and able to collaborate and make decisions for Petaluma that are in the best interest of Petaluma. Having said this, depending on the outcome of Healthy Democracy and its process and reporting, an initiative for the voters to perhaps decide on a future plan for the Fairgrounds would, in my opinion, not be out of the question. I would be open to considering it.

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

Good governance is a process of inclusion and full consideration. We need to hear from members of Marin and Sonoma County about experiences and requests and vision for the future of the Fairgrounds.

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

The ad hoc committee, or the most recent one at least, of the City of Petaluma was not effective and did not do much. Understanding the scope of issues and discussing issues for best decisions are important for both the City of Petaluma and the DAA. I believe Brian Barnacle mentioned a "bridge" or a process for extension and continuing to discuss possibilities. I support Brian's suggestion and believe that an extreme – a complete change from current activities and uses of the Fairgrounds to something completely different – which is what many are advocating – is not realistic and that change, if change is to occur in some areas, should occur over a well planned time-frame and in a way that lessens anxiety and stress, which has been very high and in large part due to uncertainty and very poor communication and management of the Fairgrounds process.

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?

Again, good governance is reflected by clear communication and a process that reduces stressors. This requires a high level of attention and competence. And I am asking Petaluma voters to look to candidates in this election who reflect fairness, boundaries from the intense politics that plague Petaluma, and an interest in an outcome that will be functional – for the present time and our future. We should learn about all of the entities referred to in your question #10 and what their agreements with the Fair Board are, as well as how these entities contribute to the overall community. I believe there is much for Petalumans to learn about the number of different uses of the buildings and grounds. At the same time, we need to understand the condition of buildings and grounds and what is being characterized as poor building conditions and maintenance. Is this true and if it is not true, could we receive clarity about this and how the Fair Board has been managing the Fairgrounds?

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

As I shared above, emergency evacuation is what I believe should be a #1 priority for this centrally located acreage with facilities to help our community and Marin and Sonoma County residents. Relocating or creating a small civic center, sustainably designed complex to accommodate City Hall, City Government HQ, and the main Police and Fire Stations, is another productive use for this property. Beyond that, I am open to understanding more fully all of the tenants and users of the Fairgrounds and what their future may be, as well as the very heartfelt campaign to Save the Fair. As I consider this, I would like for those who want to save the Fair to be open to a bridge or some expansion to accommodate new ideas and activities that are congruent with 2022 and our collective future. I have been interested in hearing from some community members who believe housing, a "central park," a large farming or agricultural area - all of these - as replacement uses for the current Fairgrounds uses. As I said earlier, this land, the expansive acreage, the open space, is actually unique and is a jewel. I do not believe taking up the open space acreage with housing or human-created uses is currently a best course for the Fairgrounds property. People can be very creative with their thinking, without considering impacts to existing uses and what may be in the best and highest interests of the whole Petaluma community. Because I hear reports from volunteers at the library of large numbers of birds that land on the Fairgrounds or appear to have this open space grassland acreage as a habitat area, I do think that activities to enhance habitat around the grounds, to support especially bird life, would help our local birds and wildlife tremendously if we keep the open-ness of the Fairgrounds, and this would not at all harm or cause any problems for people who may be utilizing facilities or the fairgrounds. Let's see how we can enhance the Fairgrounds property to support our species who are desperately needing places to forage or be for short periods of time in order to survive.

**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?**

I responded to the Speedway activities above, so will just say I am open to a variety of ideas and suggestions for what may be the best outcome to preserve the longstanding activity and to address what have been complaints about noise and emissions. Some very good discussion about how to afford electric racing vehicles has been in the media recently, in that the cost is prohibitive at this time.

**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 4<sup>th</sup> DAA and change the properties use, how should the city account for these lost public safety services for people and animals?**

I responded to this question above - The Fairgrounds should continue to be an emergency evacuation center and this should be a primary and priority "use" associated with the Fairgrounds.

**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 4<sup>th</sup> DAA on the existing fairgrounds property, what length of lease would you advocate for and why?**

I do believe a lease extension is definitely indicated and should have already been negotiated. The City of Petaluma Government has not been well managed and the anxiety and dysfunction

around the Fairgrounds situation and lease reflect this. I believe Brian Barnacle of the City Council suggested a year extension beyond the expiration of the current lease. I would be open to negotiating an extension that would relate to the 4<sup>th</sup> DAA's needs, with tenants and existing uses, and the City's planning process for potential changes in the relationship. But, to do this, we need strong leadership from our City Council TO the City Management and Legal Department. Common sense is also needed.

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

Well, I have been following the Fairgrounds situation for many years. I felt the ad hoc committee established by the City did not activate, engage or achieve much at all. I understand the realities of the tenants and users of the Fairgrounds and the anxiety that must be ongoing about what the outcome will be. I also feel it is reasonable to question that the Fairgrounds property has been leased for \$1 a year for many years and of course, in today's world, and possibly in the past, this likely was not a best arrangement for a City Government. So the history here is long and varied. There are many new residents in Petaluma who aren't aware of the history of the Fairgrounds, its meaning to the Sonoma and Marin County communities, and the dysfunction related to City of Petaluma Government, with politics, that "peppers" this entire situation. Understanding and also respecting history that is meaningful is, in my experience, very important. Being open to some change and making decisions about change that are optimal for the greater community, not a political group or a group with a certain ideology, takes skill in leadership and communication. And this process also will see a best outcome when we in Petaluma have elected leaders who are able to understand, clearly communicate with honesty, and make decisions that reflect what is in the best interest of the greater community. I appreciate the opportunity to respond to your questionnaire, and I hope my responses reflect to the reviewer how I approach decision making and leadership, with an historic understanding of where some, if not many, of the dysfunctional elements of Petaluma City Government exist. Change is a good thing - if it is achieved with respect for all concerned and occurs in a way where common sense, care and honesty are reflected values. We really need such an approach in Petaluma.

Thank you for caring about the Fairgrounds and for your dedication to this historic land of Petaluma.