



# 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.*

**Candidate Name:** Janice Cader Thompson

**District/Seat:** Petaluma City Council District 1

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

The fairgrounds, along with our river, are an interconnective part of Petaluma's rich agricultural history. When the freeway was built, it divided us into east and west-siders. Post WWII housing for veterans and their families were in high demand, and East Petaluma filled a housing need for veterans stationed at Hamilton Airfield in Novato, as well as those who were outpriced in Marin. As the eastside grew, the fairgrounds were no longer on the edge of town – it had become the center of town.

As the needs of the new residents grew, Kenilworth Junior High (now the site of the new Target center) was built, along with a city-centered library, swim center and skateboard park. These properties had been part of the fairgrounds at one time.

Petaluma has seen a surge in residents wanting more open space and recreation opportunities. They want to connect with nature and our river, and they also want to enjoy more passive recreation opportunities, like art, cooking, agriculture, music, extreme sports, and so much more.

As the central event space in the community, the fairgrounds has the potential to connect and serve East and West Petaluma. It is a place where we can celebrate our history by retaining traditions and adding diverse new uses that provide a reason for everyone in Petaluma to regularly visit the site.

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

**Favorite:**

**Favorite:** It is a community gathering space in the center of our city where we can have large events that bring the community together and celebrate our history.

**Least Favorite:** The site is centrally located in the city, and it should be a hub of recreation and educational activities for diverse ages and interests. However, unfortunately, not many activities are offered on a daily basis at the site and public access is restricted.

**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?**

East Petaluma used to have a lot of dairies and chicken ranches. I was raised in East Petaluma on a chicken farm. Unlike most farms, Cader Farms was a destination for families to experience farming: We sold fresh eggs, fresh chicken, fried chicken and home-ground dog food. Dad a WWII B-24 pilot, connected with the newcomers, who quickly became family friends and customers. This is an example of how Petaluma's ag community welcomed and taught new people about our traditions and way of life.

The fairgrounds is one of the last remaining places in Petaluma where the whole community can gather, celebrate our rich history and teach people about agriculture. We are not going to stop people from coming here (nor should we), but it is important that newcomers have a way to experience our traditions. From my point of view, the fairgrounds is the venue where newcomers to Petaluma should gain an appreciation for our traditions – and so much more.

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

None of us has any idea what the fairgrounds should be like in 100 years. The community will continue to evolve and, just as it has in the past, the fairgrounds should also evolve to meet the needs of our changing community. The opportunity before us is that, as we envision new uses and site layouts, we can preserve the traditions of agriculture, education and community resilience.

Right now, our community needs more activities for seniors and youth. Our fire department needs a centrally-located facility. The fairgrounds has a role to play in helping to address these needs and the community needs to be engaged in the process.

**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?**

**Positives:** For the last 50 years, the 4<sup>th</sup> DAA has overseen the fairgrounds and produced one of Petaluma's marquee cultural events, the fair. During this time, the 4<sup>th</sup> DAA has been responsible for maintaining the site and leasing the spaces.

**Negatives:** Whereas the city council candidates are answering questionnaires like this one to clarify their vision for the fairgrounds, the 4<sup>th</sup> DAA members are appointed by the governor and have never had to tell Petaluma voters what *their* vision is for the fairgrounds. Furthermore, because very few of the 4<sup>th</sup> DAA members live in Petaluma city limits, the 4<sup>th</sup> DAA is not in touch with the needs of city residents. For instance, our youth and seniors are struggling to address COVID-related isolation and mental health issues, and the fairgrounds could be a place for recreational activities, a modern teen center and other community facilities.

**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?**

Most planning processes last 2+ years. Given the complexities that the fairgrounds presents, doing it right could take five years. The Healthy Democracy process was one part of a larger public engagement process. It provided many useful ideas and insights that should be incorporated into the master planning process, but is not a substitute for a master planning process. We should extend the leases with the subtenants while we try out new ideas and create a master plan based on how successful the new ideas are.

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

To put it to a vote, there would have to be two choices. For example, in 2020, Petalumans voted to sell our hospital; there were two options – yes or no. With the fairgrounds, there are countless ways the site could evolve, so it's not clear what the vote would be for or against.

The most logical reason to put it to a vote would be to find out where the community stands on contentious items, such as the future of the Petaluma Speedway. I would support that being put to a vote.

The closest Petaluma can get to a vote on the fairgrounds in general is this election.

**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?**

The fairgrounds should continue to be a place where the rural parts of our community have a space in city limits. In my opinion, the fairgrounds should intentionally seek to connect people living in town with the agricultural lifestyle and history that surrounds the town (and vice versa). Thus, residents in the unincorporated areas should have a voice in the master planning process.

**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 city and the 4<sup>th</sup> DAA have not had a good relationship in the past. The main issue has always been the lease between the city and the 4<sup>th</sup> DAA. If the city and the 4<sup>th</sup> DAA are going to remain connected, the relationship must improve. The 4<sup>th</sup> DAA must stop being so focused on controlling the site and instead engage in good faith about how the site can evolve to better serve the community's needs now and in the future. The 4<sup>th</sup> DAA needs to start encouraging, supporting and participating in good faith in the public process, be open to changes about the site's uses and management, and place the best interests of the community ahead of the desire to renew the lease. If this happens, the city and the 4<sup>th</sup> DAA will make a great partnership in envisioning the space into the future.

**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?**

The subtenants who are running their businesses from the fairgrounds deserve plenty of notice if their situation is going to change. Given that neither the city nor the 4<sup>th</sup> DAA have a vetted plan for how the space should evolve, the city should provide a short-term lease extension. This (1) gives the subtenants certainty that their livelihoods are not at risk and (2) gives the city and the 4<sup>th</sup> DAA time to work together.

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

The fairgrounds have an important role to play in serving the community's needs into the future, so, yes, it should be changed. Even members of the 4<sup>th</sup> DAA say that there are many under-used areas on the fairgrounds site and that changes are needed.

**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?**

The speedway appeals to some and not others. That said, it is a longstanding piece of Petaluma that would be gone forever. If the community wants it to stay, I would support it staying. If the community does not want the track to stay, I would also support that. To understand where the community stands, I propose adding this question on the 2024 ballot: "Should the Petaluma Speedway stay?"

**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 volunteered at the fairgrounds during every fire in recent years. I've seen how much preparation and effort it takes to turn the fairgrounds into an emergency operations center. During the first fire, I was part of a volunteer team that helped upgrade the kitchen so that it could house and feed all of the evacuees. If the city terminates the lease with the 4<sup>th</sup> DAA, the city must have a plan to operate the site during emergencies. I would not support terminating the lease until such a plan exists.

**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 support a short-term lease extension because there are several unknowns and the subtenants deserve to know if their livelihoods are going to be affected.

I do not support a long-term lease with the 4<sup>th</sup> DAA or any other party. The facilities are run down; some need a lot of work and others should be replaced. Now is the optimal time to reexamine the needs of the community and make a new master plan for the site.

We need to stop thinking that a long-term lease is the only way to preserve the cherished activities that take place at the fairgrounds. Instead of focusing on a long-term lease, 4<sup>th</sup> DAA and the city should be partnering in good faith to re-imagine the

future of the fairgrounds by testing new ideas, and creating a master plan that serves us into the future and a business plan that generates enough revenue to fund basic maintenance.

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

For me, the youth are our future and, as I think about uses for this site, they are in the forefront of my mind. It's all about the future.