

D O W N T O W N V E N T U R A P A R T N E R S

2009 VENTURA CITY COUNCIL CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE

Thank you for your interest in our city council candidate forum. The issues and topics below are of great importance to downtown's residents, property and business owners. We appreciate you supplying thoughtful answers to these questions. **Please return your completed questionnaire via e-mail by noon on September 3** to Rob Edwards. Your answers will be posted on our website for our stakeholders to review. Our candidate forum will be held on the evening of September 8th; further details and a formal invitation will follow.*

And thank you for your willingness to serve our city!

Please respond below each question. Be as specific as possible.

1. Aggressive panhandling and vagrancy have profoundly detrimental affects on downtown Ventura's economic vitality, safety and quality of life. What specific steps will you propose to ensure laws regarding these behaviors are enforced, and how would you fund it?

As a preface to my response, I would just like to say that I believe that downtown Ventura represents a shining star in a struggling economy that Ventura and most other cities around the country are grappling with today. It has done amazingly well in terms of attracting new businesses (Watermark Restaurant, American Apparel, Urban Outfitters, the Buffalo Exchange, to name just a few), sponsoring community and special events, and building on its many successes to serve as a major hub for drawing additional tourism and visitation to Ventura.

With this is mind, if elected, I would propose that the City take more aggressive action to enforce existing laws and regulations regarding panhandling and vagrancy in the downtown area where violations are more pervasive. I believe the laws we currently have in place are sufficient, we just need to start enforcing them. The feedback I have

heard from the downtown business people I have spoken with indicates that the police who patrol the downtown area seem to have taken a laissez faire attitude towards the homeless population, in terms of dealing with reports by merchants and the public of aggressive panhandling, harassing customers, illegal camping, and other types of illegal behavior that affects their businesses (public drunkenness, urinating in public, peddling drugs, etc.). The problem is just as severe in the promenade area, particularly at night, adjacent to a beautiful hotel, pier, and world class beach and surfing location. This is unacceptable.

While I certainly empathize with the plight of the homeless, especially those who have recently found themselves in this situation due to current economic conditions, I also believe there is a large segment of the homeless population that prey upon others and contribute greatly to the level of crime in the community. These are the ones we need to focus our law enforcement efforts on.

In order to address the problems in the downtown related to aggressive panhandling and vagrancy, I think we need to increase the police presence downtown, specifically the downtown foot patrols and beat officer program. I realize that these services were reduced due to recent budget cuts and that funding is an issue to restore them, but I don't view the situation as hopeless. I think we can work right now to start aggressive economic development efforts throughout the City to generate new General Fund revenues that can be used to bolster police staffing, which needs to be the number one priority of our City leaders. This will enable the City to beef up its downtown law enforcement efforts and deal with the issues described above.

I do not believe that the City should be imposing new fees or taxes; however, to address these needs, as critical as they are. I think increased taxes are counterproductive to the City's economic vitality efforts and have a disproportionate impact on the poor and unemployed. That is why I am steadfastly opposed to Measure A (the half-cent sales tax measure on the November ballot).

2. Will you support the city's continued participation in the downtown Property-based Business Improvement District? Why or why not?

I am in full support of the city's continued participation in the downtown Property-based Business Improvement District (PBID) and was very happy to hear that it was approved by the City Council back in May. This entity is vital to provide stable, supplemental funding for important services downtown, including increased security; street,

sidewalk, and park maintenance; marketing and advertising; and other promotional efforts to increase downtown business activity.

I believe this organization allows downtown businesses to compete more effectively with other visitor and shopping destinations in Southern California, such as Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo, and Santa Monica, and is critical to the continued progress, growth and success of the downtown area.

While I think the use of City redevelopment funds to help finance the PBID initially was a wise decision, the City certainly would have had difficulty sustaining this level of contribution given the recent raid by the State on local redevelopment agency funding.

3. Are you in favor of building other parking structures in downtown? And if so, where would you suggest they be located and how would you fund?

I would be in favor of building other parking structures in the downtown area, if and when the demand for parking warrants it. I think the existing parking structure off California Street has made a significant difference in terms of accommodating weekend, nighttime, and special event parking needs, but, clearly, as downtown patronage grows in the future, as expected, there will be additional parking needs that will need to be addressed.

Given the limited amount of space available in the central part of the downtown area, locating a new structure or structures will be somewhat challenging. I believe sites on the outskirts of the downtown area, particularly where vacant parcels exist, will need to be explored for potential use.

In terms of how parking structures would be funded, I believe there are potential partnerships that could be arranged to come up with the initial capital to build the structures. Possible partners that immediately come to mind for me are the City's Redevelopment Agency and the PBID. I think business owners in the downtown might also step up to the plate to help finance construction costs if they were convinced of the potential benefit and the other funding commitments.

In terms of ongoing operating costs, I believe that a parking fee program would need to be established to offset the costs of operating and maintaining the parking structure(s). If done properly, it could also generate enough excess revenue to fund other downtown infrastructure improvements and maintenance items.

4. What's your position on the enforcement of laws prohibiting drug dealing in our downtown? And how would you fund enhanced enforcement?

Again, as I stated in Question #1, I don't believe there is enough aggressive enforcement of existing laws regarding drug dealing and other criminal activities downtown. This has consequences beyond the obvious and immediate ones of allowing drug dealers to continue their activities unabated downtown. It also creates an environment and culture where downtown Ventura becomes known as a place to go to buy and sell drugs, which has more long-lasting effects on the community, and once established, becomes more difficult to gain the upper hand on.

As I indicated in Question #1, I would propose to increase the police presence downtown, specifically the downtown foot patrols and beat officer program, to help address the drug peddling problem. I would fund these additional law enforcement services through more aggressive economic development efforts, which is a central theme of my campaign. That is why I believe we need to kick these efforts off to enhance our economic vitality as quickly as possible in order to begin a new era where Ventura becomes known as a City that is opening its doors to new business opportunities, rather than one that is mired in the reputation of the past of making it as difficult as possible for high quality businesses to come to town.

5. What is your position on the "sleeping in cars" pilot program?

My general feeling about the "sleeping in cars" pilot program is that it was somewhat of a token or stopgap effort by the City to address the problem and really doesn't accomplish much in the way of dealing with the underlying problem of homelessness in the community. While the initial intent of the program may have been noble enough in trying to help those folks who find themselves recently homeless due to tough economic circumstances, I think it ended up being significantly watered down due to concerns from residents, business operators, and the City's own Police Department, so much so, that it probably creates more problems than it solves.

Rather than these token, small-scale efforts that are fraught with unintended consequences and uncertainties, I would be more in favor of the City continuing its efforts working on more long-term, strategic solutions to the homeless problem, in conjunction with the social services, nonprofit, and private sector organizations. To me, this is time and money spent more effectively.

6. Would you support the funding of police foot and bike patrols in downtown and on the promenade? And if so, how would you fund them?

Yes, absolutely. Rather than being overly redundant here; however, I would defer back to my response in Question #1 on why I support an increased police presence in the downtown and promenade areas and how I would propose to fund these vital services.

7. What specific actions would you propose to encourage new residential development as well as the relocation of new businesses to downtown?

I believe Ventura has a fundamental problem with regard to attracting new development to the City and that is its reputation for having an incredibly slow and cumbersome development review process. I have personally spoken with several reputable developers who have experienced lengthy delays in getting projects through the Planning Department and the various other City department reviews and have called the process nothing short of a nightmare. The classic example, perhaps, is the 11-year process it took for the Embassy Suites Hotel to finally receive City approval of its new hotel adjacent to the Crown Plaza Hotel and the Fairgrounds. This projects a poor image of the City with respect to its attitude and receptiveness to bringing new businesses to town. Before we can seriously talk about trying to attract new residential development and new businesses to downtown, we need to restructure and reform the City's planning and development review process.

We can also do a much better job of outreach to the business community to encourage high-wage, high-tech companies, and quality retailers to consider Ventura as a place to locate or expand their business. City Council members should function more as goodwill ambassadors by attending more retail and real estate conventions to network, establish contacts, and refer prospective companies to the City as a place to locate, grow, and prosper. We have so much to offer as a City, yet we undersell ourselves far too often.

But, again, in order to attract and retain the interest of new businesses and residential projects to come downtown, we will need to cure the underlying problems with our planning permit process. We cannot hope to bring these projects to the City and expect them to flourish if they get caught up in a bureaucratic web along the way. We have to be able to offer them a guarantee that they will receive good and prompt service by City staff, an estimate they can rely on for their permit costs, and a fair and reasonable timeline for approval of their permits.

8. Do you think large-scale events previously fully funded by the City, such as ArtWalk and the holiday street fair, should be restored? And if so, how would you fund them?

I think large-scale special events, such as ArtWalk and the holiday street fair, should be supported by the City to the extent possible. They bring visitors, diners, and shoppers downtown and create a culturally rich and celebratory atmosphere that is important for any downtown to help establish its reputation and identity.

Given the funding realities the City is currently facing; however, I think more partnerships, volunteer efforts, and private and nonprofit funding support will be necessary to keep them going. I truly believe the City should be a funding partner for these events, but I think other organizations are going to need to step up to the plate as well.

I realize the City cut \$11 million from its FY 2009-10 operating budget due to revenue shortfalls and the bad economy, but I also believe that certain programs and services that didn't make the cut list should have been ranked lower in priority and could have been reduced in order to retain some of the funding that previously went towards the street fairs and special events that bring prestige, notoriety, and visitation to the downtown.

9. With the state raiding municipal coffers, how will it impact downtown operations that are currently funded by redevelopment agency? What will you do to fund those operations once our local funding is depleted?

Clearly, the state's raid on the City's redevelopment funds will have an impact on street repairs and other important redevelopment-funded projects downtown. It is my understanding that the legality of the state's take of these funds may be challenged by a conglomeration of cities and counties throughout the state. I think it would be wise for the City to join in this effort, if it hasn't already, to try and recoup this funding and/or to prevent it from happening in the future as the state continues to grapple with its endless budget woes.

I would hope that the state does not continue to use redevelopment funds to bail out its budget, as it did this year, and that this is a one-time occurrence. I am also hopeful that the legal challenges will prevail, which will prevent this from happening in the future. But, in the meantime, the City will need to find a way to help fill the gap for FY 2009-10 and beyond, if necessary, to be able to continue the necessary infrastructure and maintenance improvements that are critical to the

long-term success of the downtown. Perhaps the CIP Plan will need to be revisited and some re-prioritizing done to make some funding available for these improvements.

10. Would you support the City or the County purchasing the Fairgrounds from the state? And if so, how could it be done?

I do not feel that the City or County acquiring the Fairgrounds is a high priority at this time. I realize the state has put it out there as one of its assets that would be available for purchase from another entity; however, I don't think either the City or the County are equipped to take on the responsibility of operating and managing this facility at the present time.

For one thing, it would require a considerable outlay of capital to purchase it. Then there would be upgrades and renovations required to transform it into the type of facility the City or County would be willing and able to manage. Finally, there would be the ongoing operating and maintenance costs, which, obviously, could be funded by events, concessions, and leases, as is currently the case. But, unless it could be converted into a major profit center for the City or the County, I don't see a compelling reason to pursue acquiring it from the state at this point in time.

11. Are you in favor of limiting "big box" stores (like Wal-Mart, IKEA, etc) throughout the city, per the ballot measure?

I am absolutely not in favor of limiting "big box" stores (like Wal-Mart, IKEA, etc.) throughout the City, per Ballot Measure C. This ballot measure, which obviously is intended to prevent a Wal-Mart from coming to town, can have harmful effects that extend far beyond stopping Wal-Mart from coming into the City. In fact, the way the measure is written it could actually allow a Wal-Mart as long as it is no larger than 90,000 square feet. The current plans that have been submitted to the City call for a 98,000 square-foot store to be located at the old K-Mart site on Victoria Avenue. So, if Measure C passes, Wal-Mart could simply downscale its footprint and still move into the K-Mart location.

However, this measure could, by virtue of the square-foot limitation, prevent other highly desirable retailers that may want to come to Ventura (like Home Depot, Fry's Electronics, Costco, IKEA, Bass Pro Shops, Target, etc.) from coming here. In my opinion, this is foolhardy. It results in throwing the baby out with the bathwater and potentially depriving the City of reputable retail stores that could benefit the City

tremendously with significant ongoing sales tax revenue to support important municipal services (like public safety and street maintenance).

I also have a philosophical issue with limiting free enterprise in such an arbitrary and capricious manner, which is what Measure C does, in effect. Wal-Mart has as much right to submit plans to build a store in the City as any other business or retail establishment does. As long as it abides by the City's General Plan, zoning, and all other planning and building regulations, it shouldn't be treated any differently than any other prospective business in the City.

Measure C clearly targets Wal-Mart because its proponents do not like Wal-Mart as a business entity. It seems to me consumers should have a choice in the matter and shouldn't be dictated to by a particular group of community members who have branded Wal-Mart as the enemy. Therefore, in the name of free enterprise, consumer choice, and the City's economic future, I will be voting "no" on Measure C.

12. What specific actions would you recommend to streamline the planning process?

I would propose that the City completely revamp its planning review process to establish guidelines and procedures that are easily understandable to applicants, provide reasonable timelines for approval of projects and issuance of permits, and charge a fair, reasonable, and predictable cost to the applicants for getting their projects through the process. The current system is completely broken and, besides being extremely non-customer friendly, slow, cumbersome, and lacking predictable rules and guidelines for developers, builders, and contractors to follow, it results in unnecessary delays for projects being constructed, which deprives the City of additional tax revenue.

The Embassy Suites Hotel project that I referenced in my response to Question #7 is a classic example. Had this project come on line several years ago, as it should have, in my opinion, the City would have benefited greatly by the additional Transient Occupancy Tax (TOT) as well as the additional sales tax provided by hotel guests spending their money in town. This could have mitigated some of the \$11 million in cuts the City had to do to balance its FY 2009-10 budget.

The City recently hired a new Community Development Director, Jeff Lambert, who has a wealth of experience in both the public and private sectors in the areas of planning, land use, development, and permit

processing. He has seen how the process works, and doesn't work, from both sides of the counter. If elected, I would urge the City Council and City Manager to assign Mr. Lambert the task of working with the development community to develop new planning processing guidelines and procedures that will streamline the current system and make it more understandable, user-friendly, and responsive.

This will go a long way towards helping the City rebuild its image as a non-business friendly community to one that welcomes opportunity and becomes more prosperous as a result.

*** Completing this questionnaire is a prerequisite for an invitation to participate in our September 8th community forum.**

Downtown Ventura Partners
Rob Edwards, CEO
A 501(c)(6) Non-profit Business Improvement District
PO Box 1414
Ventura, CA 93002
info@DowntownVentura.org