

September 26, 2020

## On Housing Proposal for Laguna Honda Hospital's Campus District 7 Candidates Cavalier Responses

by Patrick Monette-Shaw

I distinctly recall a conversation I had a decade ago with a then-sitting district Supervisor when I sought help with an issue regarding Laguna Honda Hospital.

I was shocked then — and still am — by his response, in which he indicated that Supervisors tend to take a hands-off approach when it comes to issues about facilities in other Supervisor's districts, and they routinely defer to D-7's Supervisor.

It was preposterous, precisely because LHH is not an "asset" reserved for, and subject to the whims of, a single district Supervisor. It's a citywide public healthcare facility, and always has been.

It would be analogous to a Supervisor saying they were reluctant to address issues involving San Francisco General Hospital, which is located in District 10. Clearly, SFGH is also a citywide resource available to all San Franciscans, regardless of the districts they live in. Obviously, all 11 Supervisors should be involved in issues regarding both LHH and SFGH since their constituents rely on both public health facilities.

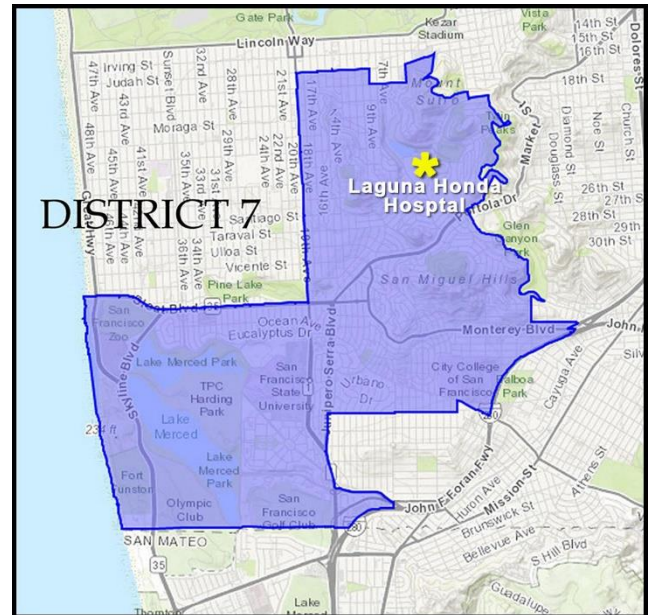
The *Westside Observer* featured an article in [August](#) 2020 surveying six candidates for District 7 Supervisor in the November 2020 election to replace Supervisor Yee, who is termed out. The questionnaire sent to candidates barely mentions whether housing on LHH's campus is appropriate, but responses to three questions were informative.

### "CEQA Streamlining" Question

The six candidates were asked whether the Planning Department's "streamlined" *Standard Environmental Requirements* (SER) runs counter to CEQA, and whether they support it. CEQA is California's 50-year old *Environmental Quality Act* that was signed into law in 1970 by then-Governor Ronald Reagan a year after the *National Environmental Policy Act* was implemented at the federal level. CEQA was designed to supplement the new federal law with even stricter standards regulating pollution and preserving the natural environment. CEQA requires California's public agencies and local governments to measure the environmental impacts of development projects or other major land use decisions, and to limit or avoid those impacts when possible.

Five of the six D-7 candidates don't support the Planning Department's SER. Only Mr. Pinto supports it.

Candidate Matranga replied saying "*CEQA provides an important opportunity to study impacts of irresponsible development, such as landslides. I oppose the current SER proposal because the public will be shut out of the process and projects would be pushed through without discussion.*" Matranga was the only one of the six candidates to even come



**Not a Personal Plaything:** Although Laguna Honda Hospital is situated in District 7, it's a citywide resource, not the personal plaything of whomever is currently D-7 Supervisor. District 7 voters and their supervisorial candidates should not forget that.

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close to noting that LHH’s campus is located in a landslide-prone neighborhood. He was *not* the only candidate to express concerns about shutting members of the public out of the discussion and development processes.

Candidate Murase thoughtfully responded by writing *“I stand with the Sierra Club opposing the SER Ordinance being pushed through now while environmental advocates and the public are struggling against a global pandemic. ... There must be full discussion on legislation that could undermine CEQA.”*

Engardio wrote, *“While I support less bureaucracy and more government efficiency, I am disappointed that the planning department chose to initiate changes during the pandemic when the community could not gather to express their views and concerns. ... Planning has said the streamlining is not meant to avoid CEQA environmental review, but the manner in which they tried to push it through with minimal public input does not instill confidence. Developments that will change our neighborhoods for generations deserve robust community-driven review.”*

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**“Candidate Joel Engardio wrote: ‘Developments that will change our neighborhoods for generations deserve robust community-driven review.’”**

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Unfortunately, following his first two unsuccessful attempts at being elected D-7 Supervisor, Engardio neglected to mention there has been zero — not robust — community-driven input or review of Supervisor Yee’s proposal to build 375 senior housing units on LHH’s campus during the two-and-a-half-years since Yee introduced his proposal in March 2018.

Ms. Melgar responded to the candidate questionnaire saying she doesn’t support the Planning Department’s SER change, writing *“CEQA is an important tool. This proposal attempts to shortcut community process by assuming environmental impact, and requiring mitigation of those impacts upfront. The problem with this approach is that it gives staff all the power, and assumes that community input is not valuable. I disagree.”* Melgar also didn’t mention that there has been no community processes on Yee’s LHH housing proposal.

Candidate Nguyen replied, saying, *“I oppose the SER Ordinance. As a general rule, I vocally oppose measures that reduce transparency and oversight, especially given the corruption at City Hall. SER would give the Planning Department and Planning Commission too much unilateral control over environmental issues. CEQA is one of California’s most important environmental safeguards and should be protected.”*

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**“None of the six candidates mentioned anywhere in any their responses that MOHCD and Supervisor Yee’s LHH housing proposal has been designed over the past two-and-a-half years to avoid a new — or any additional — CEQA review of Yee’s LHH housing proposal.”**

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Pinto was the only D-7 candidate who backed Planning’s change. As if he had not studied, or thought about the problem, Pinto wrote simply *“I support any process that reduces bureaucracy and simplifies approval processes.”* Apparently, Pinto doesn’t care whether members of the public are completely shut out of the process when it comes to development in their respective neighborhoods.

Of note, none of the six candidates mentioned anywhere in any their responses that MOHCD and Supervisor Yee’s LHH housing proposal has been designed over the past two-and-a-half years to avoid a new — or any additional — CEQA review of Yee’s LHH housing proposal. MOHCD and Yee are hoping to “grandfather” the now 375 housing units proposed for LHH’s campus by shoehorning it on to LHH’s initial CEQA review in 2002, despite the intervening 18-year period. They are willfully ignoring the fact that the now proposed 375 housing units are far more than the 240 assisted living units proposed in the CEQA review for the entire LHH rebuild project, but were never built.

#### **“Balboa Reservoir, Parkmerced, and Laguna Honda Housing” Question**

Candidates were asked — given the *work-from-home* and telecommuting trends resulting from the COVID pandemic — whether they support the need for the Balboa Reservoir development, Parkmerced expansion, and housing development on Laguna Honda’s campus.

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Five of the six candidates don’t seem to have put in any original thinking into their responses. Candidate Matranga replied predictably saying lamely *“Many of these projects have been approved by the current Board of Supervisors. I believe it is critical that the incoming Supervisor ensure that promises made to our community are promises kept.”*

What Matranga appears to have missed is that the full Board of Supervisors has not approved Supervisor Yee’s hairbrained proposal to build housing on LHH’s campus, and neither has San Francisco’s Public Health Commission, which essentially owns the land. Clearly, Yee’s LHH housing proposal has not been “*promised*,” so this can’t possibly be about keeping promises kept.

Murase responded by writing “*No, we still need all of these developments because they represent important additions to housing stock, especially affordable and family-friendly units.*” How did Miss Murase completely miss understanding that the proposed LHH housing is **not** for family-friendly units? Instead, it appears to be housing restricted to seniors earning between 30% and 80% of AMI, which is considered to be low-income housing.

Mr. Engardio wrote “*The pandemic has not lessened the need westside residents have when it comes to senior housing to age safely in place near their neighborhood or middle-income housing for their adult kids and grandkid to remain in San Francisco. A reasonable amount of housing at Balboa Reservoir (with ample parking) could be helpful. But we shouldn’t give the public land away for a song!*”

What escaped Engardio completely is that the senior housing Yee is proposing for LHH’s campus that the Mayor’s Office of Housing and Community Development (MOHCD) is now trying to shove through does **not** provide for building the senior housing throughout the entire City or anywhere near their current neighborhoods. Instead, Yee is aiming to cram 375 housing units into a single neighborhood, District 7, that he represents. And the housing at LHH is not for middle-income adult kids of the seniors.

Mr. Nguyen responded by saying “*No. All of the developments above need to continue.*” Clearly, Nguyen put no thought into this, as perceived carpetbaggers are wont to do.

Candidate Pinto was the only one of the six D-7 candidates who appeared to have put any original thinking into his response, writing “*Before we up-zone all of San Francisco which could have permanent, unintended, adverse effects, we need think about whether this is necessary.*”

Pinto clearly missed the biggest adverse effect is that if Yee succeeds at placing senior housing on the same spot as the 420-bed skilled nursing tower that was eliminated due to cost overruns on the LHH replacement facility rebuild, it will permanently impede the City’s ability to build out additional medical facilities on LHH’s campus as the City’s population increases to address hospital surge capacity.

The spot where Yee and MOHCD want to place housing on LHH’s campus is the last large piece of undeveloped land on the campus for construction. If it is used for housing, there will be no space left to build additional medical facilities on the campus as the City’s needs and population evolve.

### “Open Space” Question

Many neighborhoods surrounding LHH refer to the campus as the “*Laguna Honda Hospital Open Space Reserve.*” Whether or not it is formally designated as an Open Space worthy of protection, the trails are referred to as the *Laguna Honda Community Trails System*, which has received Open Space funding to restore the trails.



**Senior Housing Proposed for Parking Lot:** MOHCD floated this conceptual isometric design of the alternate LHH site in March 2019, six months before releasing an RFQ/RFP for the project in November 2019.

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Candidates were asked whether they support preserving “*Open Space*” in the City for future generations. *Open Space* is broadly defined as undeveloped land not intended for housing or commercial purposes that is generally publicly-owned and open to the public. Indeed, as land owned by a government agency LHH’s campus is zoned “P” [Public], which prohibits any residential uses and essentially bars building residential housing on public parcels, unless the Board of Supervisors creates a Special Use District — which has not happened.

Five of the six candidates didn’t equivocate. Candidate Ben Matranga said he favors preserving Open Space, and opposes privatizing public parks. Candidate Emily Murase said she is committed to preserving these for current and future generations. Candidate Vilaska Nguyen says he supports preservation of our Open Spaces, and says we need to fight to protect and maintain them. Candidate Joel Engardio said there is limited open space in San Francisco, and added “*We can’t give precious parkland space up for anything else.*” Candidate Martin Pinto responded saying he supports preservation of open space, because “*There is little of it left and we need to protect what remains.*”

All five of them should fight aggressively to oppose privatizing any portion of LHH’s campus, which is both public land and parkland, via LHH’s urban trails.

Only candidate Myrna Melgar hedged her bets, responding by saying “*Some revenue producing buildings on parklands provide enjoyable amenities to parkgoers as well as needed revenue. As long as there is a transparent process that includes public input, follows contracting rules, and provides for periodic performance review of operators, I support revenue producing buildings on parklands.*”

One problem Melgar all but ignores is that there has been absolutely zero public input regarding Yee’s proposal to build housing on LHH’s campus, and there has been nothing *transparent* about it since Yee first pitched his proposal back in March 2018. Another problem she ignores is that placing housing on LHH’s campus is not revenue-producing for the City. It would only be revenue-producing for a private-sector developer chosen to build the housing project.

Notably, none of the six candidates bothered to mention the Laguna Honda Trails, which encircles most of the perimeter surrounding the Laguna Honda Hospital campus and is considered to be Open Space. The trails were restored through a partnership between the San Francisco Urban Riders (SFUR), Laguna Honda Hospital, and other organizations to help construct a citywide network of bike-friendly trails. The trails also double for other uses, like hiking and trail running.

Nor did any of the six candidates bother to mention Laguna Honda Hospital’s entire campus — including its hiking and dirt bike’s trails system encircling the campus — has been locked down to members of the public and under quarantine for over six months, since March 6 when Mayor Breed issued her shelter-in-place quarantine due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

If housing is built on LHH’s campus, when the next inevitable pandemic hits San Francisco will the housing be exempt from some future campuswide quarantine, or will occupants of the housing also be forced into lockdown mode?

Yee has acknowledged that he had been working for four years, since 2016, to bring senior housing to 250 Laguna Honda Boulevard. Then he moved it to LHH’s campus. Four years later, Yee’s vision for his legacy project has gone nowhere, and should be abandoned.

All six D-7 candidates should re-evaluate their policy positions regarding placing housing on LHH’s campus. It’s a citywide resource, not a plaything of an incumbent D-7 Supervisor. District 7 voters and their supervisorial candidates should not forget that.

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**“ Only candidate Myrna Melgar hedged her bets, responding ‘As long as there is a transparent process that includes public input ... I support revenue producing buildings on parklands’ She ignored there has been absolutely zero public input regarding Yee’s proposal, and placing housing on LHH’s campus is *not* revenue-producing for the City. ”**

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*Monette-Shaw is a columnist for San Francisco's Westside Observer newspaper, and a member of the California First Amendment Coalition (FAC) and the ACLU. He operates [stopLHHdownsize.com](http://stopLHHdownsize.com). Contact him at [monette-shaw@westsideobserver.com](mailto:monette-shaw@westsideobserver.com).*