

## They're off and running

### The shape of the City Council race becomes clearer at first candidates' forum

By [Robert Speer](#)

The race to fill four seats on the Chico City Council began to take shape last Thursday (Aug. 28), when the eight candidates appeared at a morning forum in the CARD Center sponsored by the Chico Chamber of Commerce.

It became clear during their opening comments, for example, which of them had local public-service experience and which did not. Jim Walker, a family nurse practitioner who was born and raised in Chico, noted he had served on the Park Commission since 1986, taking a break only to spend eight years on the CARD Board of Directors. Mark Sorensen, also a Chico native, is a business owner who chairs the chamber's Board of Directors and is a longtime director of Catalyst, the battered-women shelter. Ali Sarsour, a retail-outlet manager, has lived in Chico since 1970, served for several years on the city Parking Place Commission, is now on its Human Resources Commission and is president of the Interfaith Council. And of course the three incumbents—Andy Holcombe, Ann Schwab and Larry Wahl—have served four years in office, with Schwab reminding that she'd also been on the Park Commission. All three are or have been business owners.

Cynthia Van Auken and Joe Valente, on the other hand, are new to public service in Chico, so their opening comments focused on matters of character, profession and philosophy. Valente, an energetic young man who several times referred to himself as "Accessible Joe Valente," owns two businesses (general contracting and wedding services). "I don't pretend to have all the answers, but I promise to work to solve the problems," he stated.

Van Auken said she and her husband moved to Chico from Atlanta in 2002 to be closer to their grandchildren. She was class president in high school and a VISTA volunteer, and said her political philosophy, quoting Thomas Jefferson, was, "That government is best which governs least."

Half the candidates (Wahl, Sorensen, Valente and Van Auken) can be characterized as conservative, half (Holcombe, Schwab, Walker and Sarsour) as liberal, though it's important to note that councilmembers often defy these easy labels, especially when it comes time to vote.

Here's how the candidates came down on some of the issues:



#### MAKING HIS CASE

Park Commissioner Jim Walker talks about his qualifications, as Chamber of Commerce Chairman Mark Sorensen and Mayor Andy Holcombe look on at a chamber-sponsored candidates' forum. Standing is Tod Kimmelshue, a member of the chamber board, who moderated the event.

Photo By Robert Speer

**Disc golf in Upper Park:** All supported it, though with varying degrees of enthusiasm and caution.

Among the conservatives, Wahl, Sorensen and Valente strongly supported the courses, as did Van Auken, who added that golfers should take care of them.

The liberals' support was more conditional. Sarsour said he couldn't "see the city spending money on it while cutting police and fire"; Holcombe said the city needed to know the costs and to plan the courses properly, "and we're not there yet." Schwab agreed the project needed "a little more consideration and vetting out," and Walker, whose motion to approve the courses was passed by the Park Commission on Aug. 25, agreed that the golfers should take responsibility for operation and maintenance.

**Expanding the Greenline:** All the candidates voiced support for the Greenline, but some believed it was due for tweaking. For example, there was consensus that the city should create a development plan for the Bell-Muir area. As Sorensen put it, "Do we just sit back and watch it being developed in low density and without the proper infrastructure?"

Sarsour noted, however, that the city can't change the Greenline. "It's the county's line," he said. "If you want to change it, run for supervisor."

Schwab and Holcombe, however, mentioned the ongoing discussions they are having with county supervisors. Changing the Greenline, Schwab said, "will take leadership, public participation and a positive interaction among the city, the community and the county."

Valente noted the Greenline was supposed to be re-evaluated every five years, "and that hasn't been done. ... As an entity it needs to stay, but maybe it can be moved a little bit."

Van Auken challenged one of the premises of the Greenline, which is that it was to direct development to the east, away from farmland. She noted that the 750-acre Bidwell Ranch, north of Wildwood Avenue, was originally zoned for development, but the City Council "voted against development there and put it behind locked gates. That's one of the problems with the Greenline."

Walker said he'd always supported the Greenline but would be in favor of minor changes.

**Downtown parking structure:** Sorensen, Wahl and Valente strongly supported building a new structure downtown—"and the time is now, not in the future," as Valente put it. Sorensen said that in his role with the chamber he hears from potential investors downtown, "and the first thing they ask about is parking."

Van Auken stated that she'd never had a problem parking. However, having to feed the meter is a problem, she said.

The university should provide more parking for students, Van Auken said. Schwab agreed, noting there was no parking problem during summer months. Sarsour scoffed at the notion of waiting for the university to act: "Those who want to work with the university, good luck," he said.

He argued that whether, when and how to build a parking structure should be part of long-range planning downtown. And Holcombe said that, while he supports a new structure, "the question is when." According to the downtown parking plan, there are other steps to take first, such as lifting the in-lieu parking fee, now nearly \$17,000 per space.

Walker said the parking issue needed to be addressed creatively. "We don't need a structure on a lot that is never full," he said, referring to Municipal Lot No. 1, at the corner of Second and Wall streets.

**Chico's business climate and mix:** Asked what kinds of businesses should be attracted to Chico, the candidates talked mostly instead about how to get and keep them here.

Sorensen noted the lack of available facilities for high-technology and faulted county supervisors for not including a proposed business and research park south of town in their general plan. "There are too many obstacles and barriers to new jobs," he said.

Holcombe said the important thing is for the city to plan well and have a permitting process that works, and Van Auken agreed, saying the city needed to be “user friendly” and the marketplace would do the rest.

Wahl, who earlier had called Chico “the best city in the greatest country in the world,” countered that Chico had “the poorest reputation around the state, as far as business friendliness is concerned.”

Several candidates suggested the issue is more than a matter of business friendliness. Walker said the important thing was to make the town attractive to people—“It’s people who come here first and bring their businesses.” And Sarsour, noting Chico’s lack of a freeway and “weak airport,” suggested holding a conference to attract former Chicoans to come back.

Schwab noted that it was hard to attract couples. If one person has a business, what work will his or her spouse do? She suggested the city work to bring in businesses that are related to each other, mentioning the wine industry in Napa Valley as an example.

**The candidates have some fundamental differences.** Wahl pooh-poohs the current emphasis on compact growth, supporting instead “traditional” single-family homes with large back yards. The city should stick to providing basic services like police, fire and libraries and stop spending on expensive studies, he said.

Sorensen echoed Wahl, saying the city’s first priority is police and fire and lamenting the expenditure of \$600,000 on a Bidwell Park management plan and \$1.5 million on the general plan. The city’s finances haven’t been managed well, he said, and current budget projections are unrealistic.

Holcombe disagreed, reminding that the general plan is mandated by state law. “If we didn’t spend money on our general plan,” he said, “we would have a weak foundation for our community.” As mayor, he’s worked hard to build consensus and improve the processes of government, he said.

And Schwab, summoning the ghost of John Bidwell, said leadership was key to “sustaining Chico’s values.”

Sarsour said it was ironic “to hear how great the city is and then how terrible, sometimes in the same paragraph. ... Yes, we do have problems, but look at Vallejo [which went bankrupt] and ... the state budget problems. ... We’re doing a good job here, and will continue to do a good job.” The worst thing candidates and councilmembers can do, he added, “is be hostage to our own ideology.”