

# The Carmel Pine Cone

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## First of two voter forums has candidates say what they would do for business

By MARY SCHLEY

**F**IELDING QUESTIONS primarily focused on business, candidates for mayor and the city council tried to convince voters during a Carmel Chamber of Commerce forum Thursday night they deserve to be elected Nov. 3.

The opening question — the first of nine selected by members of the chamber's government affairs committee beforehand but not shared with the candidates in advance — focused on the leadership skills candidates feel give them a leg up on the competition.

Incumbent Mayor Dave Potter described his “extensive amount of experience in local government,” including two decades as a county supervisor, a dozen years on the powerful California Coastal Commission, terms on the Monterey Planning Commission and city council, and, of course, his two years as mayor here.

“I’ve also got the ability to communicate with other elected officials throughout the county, throughout the state and actually at the federal level, and that gives Carmel the opportunity to really talk about what really matters to us, to give us a pulpit that we wouldn’t normally have

and access that most people can’t bring,” he said.

Challenging him for mayor, Judy Refuerzo said she managed offshore operations and subcontractors in the Far East for a Silicon Valley company, which required “building consensus and getting the job done.” She also serves as chair of the city’s community activities commission and has led other boards in their collaborative efforts.

Incumbent councilman Bobby Richards said having empathy is important in leadership, because it allows

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Dave Potter



Judy Refuerzo



Karen Ferlito



Mo Massoudi



Bobby Richards



Graeme Robertson

him to “listen to their problems and concerns” without “trying to think of a rebuttal as they’re speaking.” He also said his “strong sense of loyalty” makes him a good leader.

Council candidate Karen Ferlito said her years on the boards of the Big Sur Land Trust, Friends of Carmel Forest and Friends of Mission Trail Nature Preserve included many opportunities to lead. “I had to work through some difficult issues and problems on all of those boards,” including land acquisition and conservation, she said. “I also have no conflicts of interest, since I don’t hold any businesses downtown, and that’s a plus.”

Mo Massoudi, also running for council, said he believes leaders are made, not born, and that his founding and running a genomics company in Monterey for 23 years and owning an Ocean Avenue bakery for 12 position him well to lead in office. “I have given this community so much and am willing to give more, because it has given me so much,” he said.

Graeme Robertson, who is also seeking a council seat, noted his service on the boards of the Carmel Youth Center, Rotary, chamber of commerce, MEarth Habitat, Carmel Public Library Foundation, Church in the Forest and other boards. “I have had leadership positions in each one of those,” he said, adding that as an executive for Pepsi Co, he managed “up to 120 different people in different facilities around the country.”

“I believe in a balanced, collaborative approach,” he said, including “listening, communication and empathy for what we want to get accomplished.”

### ‘Carmel’s biggest threat’

When asked to identify the biggest threat the city faces and how to address it, most candidates said that threat is already here in the form of a pandemic and the economic havoc it is wreaking, though some focused on wildfires, which are ravaging the state on a new level this year.

Refuerzo said the greatest threat involves “maintaining our vibrancy,” and “keeping the businesses afloat.”

“I hate walking downtown and seeing all these vacant stores,” she said. “We need to help these businesses survive any way we can.”

Richards focused on fires. “It has to be on the top of all of our minds to reduce the fuel, whether in Mission Trail, Pescadero or downtown,” he said. “We have to be as vigilant as we can.”

Richards also noted the city’s fiscal stability relies on creativity and cutting costs, considering revenues are down because fewer people are shopping, dining and visiting.

Ferlito noted the town’s economic viability heavily relies on tourist dollars. “So, we protect what we have and not let it be cheapened because we have to make short-term decisions,” she said. “We want to beautify our community so people will continue to want to come here.”

Massoudi mentioned fire risks and coronavirus, and their impacts on business and quality of life.

“I hope we come up with comprehensive plans to battle both,” he said.



“We’re living the biggest threat,” Robertson agreed. City officials have done a good job of helping businesses survive during the shutdown, but a long-term view is needed. By bringing businesses, residents and visitors together, they can “reevaluate where we are, from a revenue perspective,” he said. Water supply and wildfires are big concerns, too.

“We’ve got all sorts of issues,” Potter said. “Obviously, everyone has spoken very well in terms of Covid.” But the city also faces a \$20 million CalPERS debt, deferred maintenance — especially since all capital projects were sidelined due to coronavirus — and the challenge of helping businesses thrive.

### **Finding more money**

To address revenue shortfalls, Richards suggested imposing an “excise tax” on owners of vacation homes and an additional transfer tax when properties sell. “We have made budget cuts, and those are the hardest,” he said, especially with layoffs.

Richards emphasized the importance of having full-time residents downtown to patronize shops and restaurants, since they keep the city vital, especially during slow-

er months.

Ferlito said residents spend the dollars that help keep the budget healthy, but they don’t venture downtown much, due to coronavirus. “Until our residents feel safe and feel like they can walk downtown, they’re not shopping, and they’re not dining,” she said. Ferlito suggested extending sidewalks and limiting traffic to accommodate pedestrians who want to keep a safe distance from others, and attracting more resident-serving businesses, such as hardware stores.

Massoudi said city officials should treat the public’s money as if it’s their own. “Raising taxes may not solve the problem,” he said. “We have to look at our own budget.”

He suggested getting rid of outside contractors and marketing the city as a destination for overnight stays, which bring in more tax dollars.

### **‘Never seen a tougher budget’**

Robertson said giving people good reasons to come dine and shop is key. “As part of this Covid situation, we have to work with the chamber and Visit Carmel and the residents association to incentivize locals and visitors to be downtown,” he said.

And while nearly half the budget goes to salaries and benefits, the rest is allocated to other expenses that should be heavily scrutinized, he said.

“The budget has always been a challenge,” Potter commented. “This is my 26th budget, and I’ve never seen a tougher budget than this.”

Jobs were cut and capital projects were delayed, but “we have critical services that we don’t want to jeopardize.”

Refuerzo observed that a brisk and competitive real estate market should bring in more property taxes and suggested thinking creatively.

“We have brought up parking so many times, and I don’t like idea of paid parking downtown,” she said, but perhaps non-locals parking at the beach could be required to pay.

“There are ways we can look at of increasing our budget and looking at the bottom line,” she said.

Candidates were asked what kind of businesses the town needs.

Ferlito favored restaurants catering to a wide range of tastes and budgets, a hardware store and other shops that offer “things our residents want and need,” but she wants to figure out how to outlaw the skincare stores that have employees hawking products from doorways and sidewalks, and which are often the subject of complaints.

Massoudi said he is “strongly in favor of locally owned businesses,” since revenues earned in them end up being spent here. “I don’t want the money to go to Wall Street,” he said. “There’s pride of ownership in local businesses.”

“Having those locally owned businesses is hugely important,” agreed Robertson, whose family moved from Scotland to Carmel in 1965 when he was 6 and ended up opening two stores in town.

“We need to incentivize people who live and work here to be successful in business,” he said.

Potter said it’s not government’s job to dictate what the private sector does and which businesses should open. He focused on a long-wished-for public-private project to



bring parking, retail and living space to the north lot at Sunset Center.

Refuerzo mentioned many businesses that have closed, especially those serving locals, and said the city could do a lot to bring those types of stores — which would also appeal to tourists — back.

“We have to reach out to our friends who have businesses,” and encourage them to open here, Richards commented, adding that closures due to Covid present new opportunities for innovative local business people.

Regarding a long-term plan for restaurants and other businesses trying to survive during the pandemic, Massoudi said the city should relax a little on the rules. He pointed out the hoops he had to jump through as owner of Café Carmel when he wanted to bring a musician in to attract afternoon customers. “Government is there to facilitate the success of the businesses,” he said.

The pandemic has shown how much people like outdoor dining, “and if we can somehow polish this and take this time over the winter months to start a planning process” that results in a high-quality product, Ferlito said, the outcome will be positive, especially since restaurants are unlikely to reopen indoors anytime soon.

“I’d like to see us have an open mind but protect the character of this village,” Richards summarized.

Refuerzo said everyone seems to enjoy outdoor dining, and many restaurants are doing a great job, while others are not. Regardless, the owners should know what sort of timeframe they’re working with, considering building parklets can be expensive.

“If they spend the money to make it look like we want it to look,” she said, “I think we owe it to them to give them a timeline.”

Potter said the city and its businesses are in “survival mode” and officials should do “whatever we can do to help these businesses to survive.” Business owners should avoid “merchant envy,” when one sector begrudges the support given another, and everyone should work together.

Robertson suggested talking to restaurant owners to see how they are doing and what’s working.

“We need to get together with the people who are executing the meals day in and day out to see what that experience will look like on a long-term basis,” he said.

Other questions focused on whether new events should appeal to a “younger demographic,” policies that should be revisited or added, and how the candidates would support the chamber of commerce.

The meeting was recorded and can be accessed through Zoom. Email [info@carmelchamber.org](mailto:info@carmelchamber.org) for the link and password.