

BETTER BERKELEY TIMES

NEWS FOR OUR COMMUNITY

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THE STATE OF THE CITY

In choosing photos for the fourth issue of *Better Berkeley Times*, we noticed what looks to be flames in the foreground, rising above the rooftops. Is it possible the photographer caught evidence of a fire, or is just the angle of the camera? Upon further examination we see it is only an illusion from the setting sun.

That got us thinking – what illusions might the citizens of Berkeley be under? A lot has happened since the pandemic and the many are feeling the squeeze. In this issue we examine the city's chronic reliance on tax revenue, review a \$10m investment in homeless housing, and discuss how the Berkeley Rent Stabilization Board works. As inflation (and a probably recession) loom over our heads, all eyes are on the November 8 election.

The PEW Research Center in Washington D.C. recently reported that, "Public trust in government has hit an all-time low. When the National Election Study began asking about trust in government in 1958, about three-quarters of Americans trusted the government to do the right thing almost always or most of the time. Trust in government began eroding during the 1960s, amid the escalation of the Vietnam War, and the decline continued in the 1970s with the Watergate scandal and worsening economic struggles. Confidence in government recovered in the mid-1980s before falling again in the mid-1990s. But as the economy grew in the late 1990s, so too did confidence in government. Public trust reached a three-decade high shortly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, but declined quickly thereafter. Since 2007, [those] saying they can trust the government always or most of the time has not surpassed 30%."

It remains to be seen whether the goals of Berkeley's city government is a reality or just another illusion. Only time – and the voter's vote – will tell.

WHAT HAS YOUR COUNCILMEMBER DONE FOR YOU LATELY?

Unless you're a public policy wonk (or someone who has a lot of free time on their hands) you probably don't know much about how Berkeley city government works. Yet the decisions of government officials impact your quality of life every day. It pays to know which Councilmember represents where you live and it pays to keep tabs on their effectiveness (or lack thereof). Berkeley residents have the power to vote elected officials in - or out - of office.

Berkeley City Council consists of eight Councilmembers, elected by districts for four-year terms, and one Mayor, elected "at large" for a four-year term. The Mayor is the President of the Council and votes as an individual ninth member. Neither City Councilmembers nor the Mayor have term limits. Some Councilmembers have been in office for over 25 years! Below is the current landscape of your elected City Councilmembers and Mayor.

DISTRICT 1 - RASHI KESARWANI *

DISTRICT 2 - TERRY TAPLIN

DISTRICT 3 - BEN BARTLETT

DISTRICT 4 - KATE HARRISON *

* four year term ending November 8

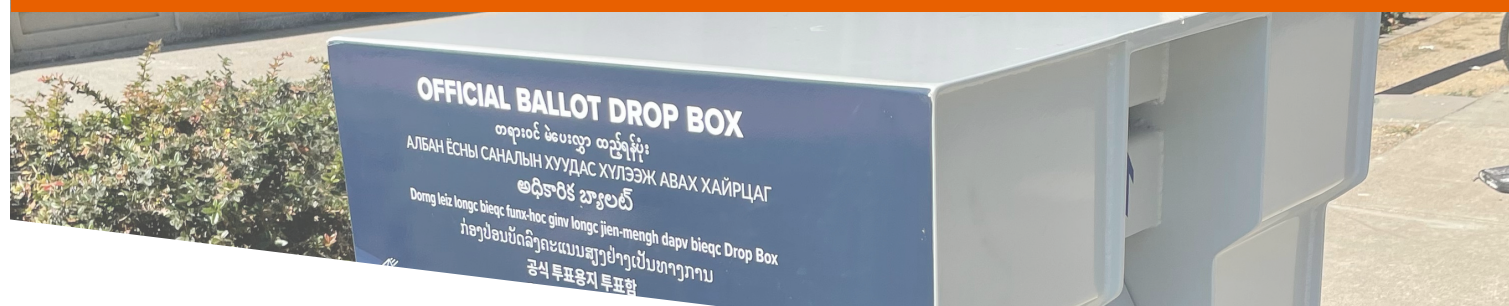
DISTRICT 5 - SOPHIE HAHN

DISTRICT 6 - SUSAN WENGRAF

DISTRICT 7 - RIGEL ROBINSON *

DISTRICT 8 - LORI DROSTE *

MAYOR JESSE ARREGUIN

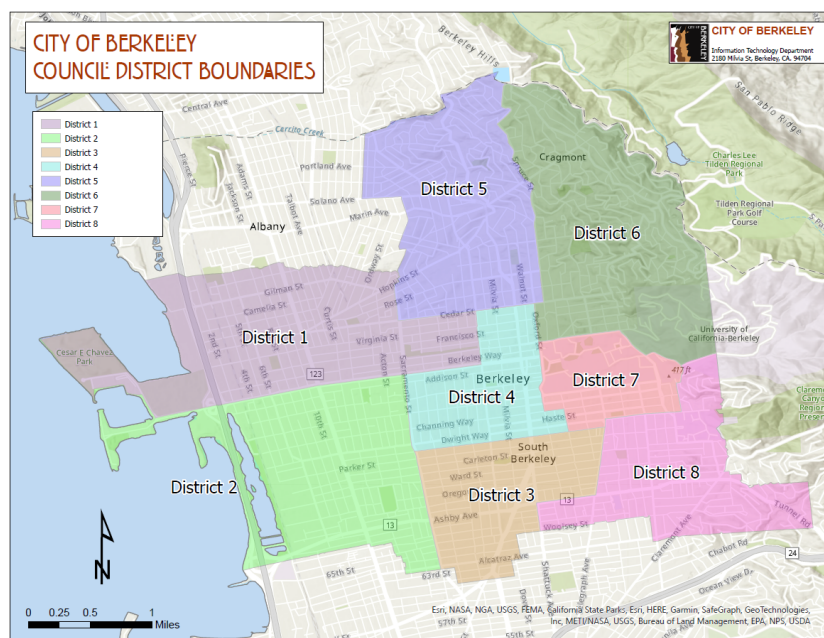


COMMUNITY SURVEY RESULTS

Asked of 500 likely voters, "Of these identified important needs of the city, which two are most important to you?"

(in order of importance)

1. Increasing affordable housing.
2. Repairing deteriorating streets & sidewalks.
3. Undergrounding utilities for fire prevention.
4. Protecting critical facilities from the threats of climate change.



UNSURE OF WHO YOUR CITY COUNCILPERSON IS?

Go to www.berkeleyca.gov and search for "Council District Lookup"



BERKELEY'S HOMELESS SHELTER FAILING?

After much fanfare in July 2021 (and \$10m in costs) the West Berkeley Horizon Transitional Village homeless shelter and SPARK RV parking lot is at risk for closure. The *Better Berkeley Times* reported on the opening of the shelter in our last issue. Buoyed by a wide array of elected officials, community members, and those who represented the unhoused, all hoped the Grayson Shelter (its common name) was the answer Berkeley so desperately needed.

The property was an old warehouse that had been converted into a shelter where the homeless could pitch their tents inside. It is open 24-hours a day and does not have curfew or security guards. Supportive "wraparound" services include management of health issues and training for jobs. However, there is no requirement to work towards securing a job in order to continue to stay at the shelter.

The shelter's operations and day-to-day activities are managed by the Dorothy Day House. Residents of the shelter are permitted to use the shelter as a safe injection site, or can opt to get help alternative help for their addiction. These are methods typically used in an approach called "harm reduction." These policies have been extraordinarily controversial in San Francisco due to the overwhelming impact of the open air market in the Tenderloin district. Safe injection sites are often vehemently opposed by neighbors who live near them.

The shelter was at risk for closing on September 30. The building is owned by a Bay Area development

company who plans to turn it into a life sciences hub. City Council scrambled and was able to secure an extended lease with the developer through October 31. The fate of the SPARK safe parking site was still in question, as part of the agreement for use included the presence of security.



50 people have lived at the shelter since its opening - that's an approximate cost of \$200,000 per person.

Not much has been said about the shelter since the City Council's save, and many question its overall effectiveness in reducing homelessness. Residents say they still feel the impact daily of the unhoused on the resident's surroundings. While sympathetic to the challenges of the unhoused community members, the cost to personal safety and quality of life is worrisome. As one resident said, "Maybe some of the elected officials have a spare room in their house they could offer up to an unhoused person?"

“ — **OVERHEARD** — ”

LIVING IN BERKELEY IS LIKE LIVING IN A CONSTANT PBS FUNDRAISER.



GET PAST ISSUES OF THE NEWSLETTER

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BERKELEY'S RENT BOARD

If you're not a renter, or if you don't own rental housing, you probably know little about Berkeley's Rent Stabilization Board. Yet every election Berkeley's voters are asked to vote on issues related to rental housing.

WHAT IS THE BERKELEY RENT BOARD?

A \$6.5m independent agency that oversees rent regulations for all rentals...including in-law units and single family homes!

WHAT IS AN ELECTED RENT BOARD?

An At-Large body of 9 commissioners responsible for providing guidance to City Council and Rent Board staff on issues concerning rental housing policy. Commissioners can serve two terms, of four years each. For the past four years, the board has been comprised of 8 tenants and one single-family homeowner whose son works for the Eviction Defense Center (a tenant-only resource for access to tenant lawyers).

HOW IS RENTAL HOUSING POLICY CREATED?

The Rent Stabilization & Just Cause Ordinance was ushered in by Berkeley voters starting in 1978. The ordinance itself can only be changed by way of the voter, however the Rent Board does have significant leeway in creating Regulations and Resolutions that "further clarify the intent of the Rent Stabilization Ordinance."

HOW IS THE RENT BOARD FUNDED?

Primarily by annual registration fees paid for by owners of rental housing. It is a per-unit fee and is not an expense that can be passed on to the tenant.

HOW RENT BOARD COMMISSIONERS ARE CHOSEN

Every election 4-5 Rent Board commissioner seats come before the voter. The outcome is the result of a plurality vote and all commission seats are At Large (representing all voters in the city of Berkeley.)



THE GRAND JURY REPORT

The civil grand jury of Alameda County acts as a "watch-dog" by investigating the workings and efficiencies of county and local governments.

In 2012 the Rent Board came under scrutiny when two Rent Board employees petitioned the court to investigate allegations of unfair hiring practices. The report was scathing and noted that the Rent Board was "...a self-sustaining bureaucracy that operates without effective oversight and accountability. [It's] independence from the city of Berkeley contributes to excesses in its registration fees, in compensation for the director and members of the board, and to perceptions of impropriety in personnel procedures."

In 2020, the long-standing Executive Director was put on administrative leave and ultimately "retired" after allegations of harassment related to Rent Board personnel.

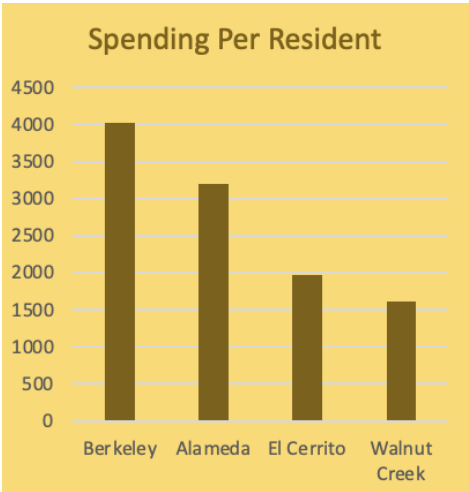
The only oversight the agency has is from its At-Large elected Board of Commissioners - all of whom are tenants. The details of how the \$6.5m is spent is limited and rarely transparent.

BERKELEY TAXES

When Berkeley homeowners examine their property taxes, they are stunned by the many charges tacked on just for owning in Berkeley. Listed as a "special assessment" on the tax bill, these are additional taxes specific to Berkeley and approved each election by the voter.

Berkeley has the third highest tax rate in the county. Spending per resident is more than double neighboring cities, yet essential infrastructure ranks near the bottom.

That's where the special assessments come in. These are additional costs added to your property tax bill to support the financial needs of the city. They are also what ranks Berkeley third in spending per resident for California cities with a comparable population. One has to ask, "Am I getting what I paid for?" Maybe only time will tell.



Source: CA Controllers Cities Financial Data



THE HISTORY OF MONEY-RAISING BALLOT MEASURES

How many tax-related measures has Berkeley had?

Berkeley has had five bond measures and six tax measures since 2010.

What is a General Obligation Bond?

Also known as a GO Bond, this is a type of municipal bond in which the bond repayments (both interest and principal) are guaranteed by the total revenue generated by the local municipality.

What are GO bonds used for?

They are primarily used to finance infrastructure projects such as roads, but can also be used for other purposes identified by the municipality.

How do they work?

Investors who purchase the bonds provide capital to the municipality. In return, the investors are entitled to a portion of the revenues generated from the projects, as well as the tax revenues. Similar to a loan, the GO Bond has payments plus interest and is for a specified period of time.

Source: Corporate Finance Institute



READER COMMENTS

"I enjoy your newsletter as a slice of sanity in this town. Despite having paid (in the five years since moving here), at least \$65,000 in property taxes, I often wonder what the heck I'm getting for it." *Jay M.*

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"I just wanted to say that I really appreciate the newsletter you sent out last week. We need to keep this up in order to hold the City of Berkeley accountable." *Brian B.*

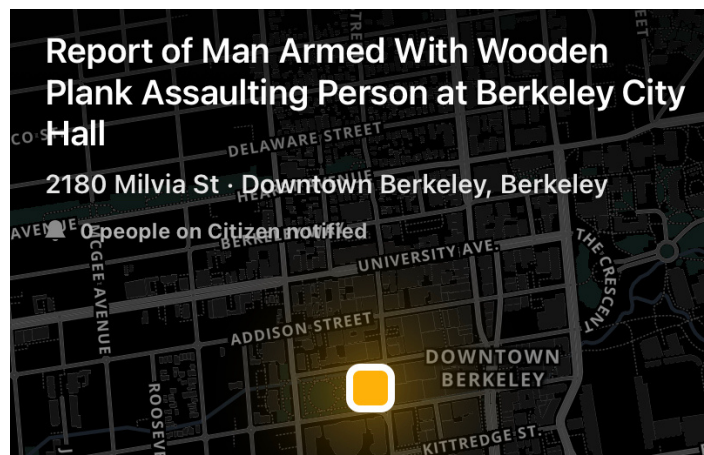
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"The citizenry itself follow like blind sheep voting to tax themselves again and again with nothing concrete to show for it. Your newsletter sheds light on the issues those in power want to avoid, and no one seems to want to talk about." *John C.*

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DANGEROUS STREETS

If you're a user of the crime reporting app Citizen, and you've noticed an uptick in reports of assault, robbery, and brandishing of weapons, you are not alone. Residents on social media platforms such as Twitter and Nextdoor.com openly worry about the their safety and the safety of their loved ones. A recent notification shows that even City Hall and its inhabitants are not immune to potential physical and emotional assault.



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