

Green Party Questionnaire for County Assessor

GREEN PARTY OF ALAMEDA COUNTY
2018 ENDORSEMENT DECISION

Please email your responses to GPAC-VoterGuide@yahoo.com. In the subject line, please include "County Assessor".

We prefer that you convert your answered questionnaire into a .pdf document, so we can post it directly to our website. Or simply include your responses in the body of an email, and we will do the conversion.

If it is not possible for you to email, please snail mail your responses so we receive them by 3/25, to:

County Assessor
c/o Green Party of Alameda County,
[2022A Blake Street * Berkeley, CA 94704](https://www.google.com/maps/place/2022A+Blake+Street,+Berkeley,+CA+94704)

Name: Phong La

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Website: www.votephongla.com

Current line of work: Tax/Real Estate Attorney and Small Business Owner

1) Please give a brief summary of your background and qualifications for the office of County Assessor.

I am a former community college real estate economics professor, attorney and a small business owner, with a long record of community service and volunteerism. As a Real Estate Attorney specializing in State and Local Taxation, I work directly with the Assessor's Office on a regular basis. That experience allows me to see how the office can improve to better serve the residents of Alameda County.

2) Where will you get (have you already received) the money to run your campaign? Describe sources of financial contributions for your campaign that you would refuse to accept (if any).

All my donations to date have come from family and friends across the county and state. I will not accept campaign contributions from oil companies, fracking companies and companies or organizations that support discriminatory causes.

3) What endorsements have you received thus far?

(Partial list – more endorsements on my webpage)

Mike Honda, Former U.S. Representative

Betty Yee, State Controller

John Chiang, State Treasurer

Bob Wieckowski, State Senator

Rob Bonta, State Assemblymember

Evan Low, State Assemblymember

Ash Kalra, State Assemblymember

David Chiu, State Assemblymember

Barbara Parker, Oakland City Attorney

4) Why are you running? What do you believe are the main priorities for the County Assessor's office?

I'm a no-nonsense problem solver. I want to transform the Assessor's Office and jump start a slow moving bureaucracy. I have worked with the Assessor's Office for years and have first-hand experience with the how the office works – and doesn't work for residents.

We need an Assessor who respects property owners and taxpayers. During the Great Recession, I volunteered at legal clinics to help homeowners keep their homes from being foreclosed. I identified flaws in Alameda County's assessments that caused individual homeowners as well as one of my businesses to be overcharged.

Challenging the wrong assessments and correcting these mistakes were complicated, and I realized that the process could be terribly confusing for average citizens. Over the years, I've assisted many residents and business owners file appeals in order to receive an accurate assessment for their homes and businesses.

YOU, the taxpayer deserve working with an Assessor's Office that will be accurate, fair and efficient!

- I believe in fair and accurate taxation, not over taxation.
- I'm excited to bring fresh ideas and outside real estate legal experience to the Assessor's Office – giving this slow moving bureaucracy a jump-start.
- As Assessor, one of my goals will be to simplify the forms that small business owners are required to fill out.
- When residents have questions about how to fill out forms, I will have volunteer legal agencies help them at the Assessor's Office.
- I want to take the Assessors Office's services directly to the neighborhoods by providing real estate, financial and estate planning workshops. I want to help families find affordable housing and keep their housing by not being overcharged unfair taxes.
- A taxpayer focused Assessor must be dedicated to online submission. I will focus on modernizing and improving our online processes. Right now, customers must print out online forms and then deliver them to the office to file.

5) How would you assess the current incumbent's job performance? Please cite specific strengths and/or weaknesses.

The current Assessor is retiring after 16 years in the position, and has maintained a working relationship with the Board of Supervisors, thus the office budget as approved by the Supervisors continues to increase. However, office morale is low among the staff, and available technology has not been utilized to make the office more efficient and user friendly for the public.

6) Please tell us three suggestions you would make to the Board of Supervisors that would make the Assessor's office more helpful to the people of Alameda County. (These could relate to economic efficiencies or other topics of your choice.)

1. Have localized satellite Assessor's Offices so that residents in South Alameda County and East Alameda County do not have to travel to Oakland in order to be at the Assessor's Office.

Alameda County currently operates buildings in Dublin/Pleasanton and Hayward/Fremont near public transportation. The Assessor can easily seek a small space in these buildings to allow residents to submit documents and ask questions without driving to Oakland.

2. Use technology to allow residents the option to submit all documents online and allow residents to opt out of receiving paper documents mailed to them for regular required filings.

3. Create space within the county buildings for non-profit agencies to assist residents when they disagree with the Assessor's valuation and if they have questions about the process to contest the valuations.

7) Because of long-standing structural budget problems at the State and local levels, some people are advocating California's adoption of "split-roll" taxes on real property (maintaining "Proposition 13" rules for owner-occupied residences while increasing taxes on commercial property). Would you support or oppose such a change? Do you anticipate any practical difficulties to implementing such a change?

The discussion and proposal to change Prop 13 via a "Split-roll" needs to include two things:

1. An exclusion of re-assessment for residential rental properties. Increases in property taxes for residential rentals will increase the rent for renters. Many people in our county struggle financially and increases in rent will force more people out of homes and out of our county.

2. An exclusion for small business owners. I've witnessed many friends and family members struggle with their small retail or service businesses against the likes of Walmart and Amazon. I can't justify the loss of more small businesses in our community especially in lower income areas. Most of these business owners signed "triple net" leases which means they pay for the property taxes, not their landlords. Thus, the cost is passed to the small business owners, increasing their monthly rent and possibly putting many of them out of business.

I do see the benefit of a "Split roll" when it comes to larger corporations. Large corporations such as Disney, Walmart, and Wells Fargo, should not continue to benefit from an assessment from 1975. Proposition 13 was never intended to protect corporations that "live" forever from owning properties that never get re-assessed. It was an unintended consequence of how Prop 13 was written.

I don't want "Split roll" to put renters and small business operators out. Unless there are exceptions and exclusions as listed, I cannot support it.

That being said, should the majority of voters call for "Split roll", I must respect their decision. The implementation of "Split roll" will be very difficult, especially in the first year as all commercial properties will be re-assessed at once, but I am up to the challenge.

8) Concretely and specifically, how will you make yourself available to those who elect you? That is, how can we participate in holding you accountable if you are elected?

I hope and expect that the residents of Alameda County will hold me accountable by either keeping me in office if I am doing a good job or removing me if I am not. I plan to hold regular meetings with the public at different places around the county so I can hear from those that I work for. I also plan to host online live chats and forums so that residents of the county can more easily voice their concerns or suggestions for improvement. I don't want to just speak to the residents of our county, I want to hear from them.

9) What is your political party affiliation and how committed are you to that affiliation?

I am a registered Democrat. I am very committed to my party as it believes in social justice, environmental protection, equality for all, and other values that I hold dear. I understand other political parties may hold similar values as well.

10) Anything you would like to add?

Thank you for taking the time to read my questionnaire. I would be very honored and humbled to receive the endorsement of the Green Party.

Thank you!

Greg Jan

Please RSVP now, and respond by Sunday, March 25, 2018