

La Jolla's Lightner presses for community power in District One Council run

By Ian S. Port
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Sherri Lightner worked for over two decades as an engineer for various San Diego aerospace and technology firms. While that may not sound like the most intuitive preparation for public service, Lightner, who now seeks a seat on the San Diego City Council, says it's actually been a pretty useful one.

"It helps me understand problems because I do delve into the details and part of engineering is knowing how everything works together," Lightner said. "I can usually assess whether the details tie up to make the overall picture that's being presented."

With more than a decade of experience serving on community groups in La Jolla, Lightner says the picture of San Diego she's been presented with is one where it seems development interests often trump those of the community. Whether it's a carwash that was built where it wasn't allowed, or the authorization to build a bridge in a sensitive area without adequate understanding of environmental impacts, Lightner says she'd work to give neighborhoods more of a voice in city politics than they've had in the past.

"There's a lot of power on the side of developer applicants," Lightner said. "With my experience serving on some of the land use committees, you know when someone's doing something that's beyond what should be going on, largely because they show up with their attorneys. [I] found a lot of times our community wasn't listened to."

Lightner, a registered Democrat and first-time candidate, is in a three-way race with Carmel Valley residents Marshall Merrifield, also a first-time candidate, and Phil Thalheimer. Both Merrifield and Thalheimer are Republicans.

They all seek to replace Scott Peters, who has held the District One seat on the San Diego City Council since 2002, and is now running for City Attorney.

Lightner entered community politics through a seat on the La Jolla Shores Association, a group that represents the neighborhood where she has lived since 1992. She said she was first struck by the need for strong land-use controls while observing the conversion of the older, smaller homes into massive two- and three-story spec houses that affected the character of the neighborhood.

"As a consequence of caring about my community I found out more and more about what was going on," Lightner said.

From there, Lightner went on to serve as a member and officer on the La Jolla Community Planning Association, the La Jolla Town Council and the La Jolla Historical Society, all volunteer positions. She recently gave up her seat on the town council to run for city office.

"It is an evolution, and I have learned first-hand about traffic issues and parking issues and development issues and coastal issues and [had] a lot of very interesting experience over the years," she said.

Lightner said her first priority as a member of the council would be to put a quick end to the city's ongoing financial crisis through whatever means necessary.

"We need to really open everything up and snoop around a little bit and see how many people you can get to the table to figure out what we're going to do going forward," she said. "But it has to be resolved so that we can bond and get some of our infrastructure needs taken care of. We need to focus on the neighborhood services — I think it's not acceptable to put in these wonderful parks and recreation facilities and libraries and not have them be open."

Lightner also mentioned other infrastructure issues such as sewer treatment (the city's treatment plant is severely outdated) and street repairs as priorities.

She has pledged support for the agenda of STOP, a local group that seeks to keep Caltrans and the city from taking private property for the construction of direct connectors between I-5 and SR-56. She pointed to the connector issue as the largest in the North City area at the moment.

But Lightner said a big part of her role in San Diego government would be restoring the confidence in it that has been lost through years of financial and other turmoil. Growing up in San Diego, she had the belief that "we were the best thing going in the whole nation at the time," and it's time to get that feeling back, she said.

"Instead of sort of wallowing in our morass of problems here ... yes, we need to take care of them and then build up people and give some hope again."

Lightner wouldn't offer an assessment of Peters' term in office other than to say that "some of things Scott has done have been great and some of the things have been not so great." But she pointed to several of his votes on matters in La Jolla where she strongly disagreed.

From time spent walking various communities in the council district, Lightner says she gets the feeling that residents have yet to begin paying close attention to the council race. She says a poll from last summer put her ahead of her two opponents, but noted that Thalheimer was ahead in his own polls. Her campaign couldn't afford to do polling, she mentioned with a chuckle.

With a full-time campaign staff of two, and "a ton of volunteers," the UCSD grad and mother of two is now set to work campaigning full-time out of an office in Clairemont Mesa, walking local streets and attending community meetings, just as she has been doing for over a decade.

"I want to restore citizen confidence and trust in the government to know that in fact ... I as a city council person represent the neighborhoods, I care about the neighborhoods," Lightner said. "The neighborhoods are where people live and they have all their money tied up in their neighborhoods and they do know what they want in their neighborhoods. And I think my experience as a community person lends me to put more credibility in what the neighbors are actually saying."

This is the second in a series of stories on the District One candidates.



Sherri Lightner