City of Santa Clara

CITY COUNCIL PRIORITY SETTING SESSION

Held on: APRIL 3, 2025

City of Santa Clara
The Center of What's Possible

RAFTELIS

On April 3, 2025, the City of Santa Clara (City) held a City Council Priority Setting Workshop. The session was planned and facilitated by Raftelis, in cooperation with City staff.

Welcome and Introductions

Mayor Lisa Gillmor welcomed her colleagues and staff and thanked City Librarian Patty Wong and her staff for hosting the session. City Manager Jovan Grogan expressed enthusiasm about the opportunity for the Council to focus on its priorities, and then introduced the facilitator, who reviewed the agenda, workshop norms, and expectations for the day. Councilmembers' expectations were captured by the visual facilitator, as shown below on the left.

Next, the group shared their thoughts on the following questions: 1) What makes Santa Clara special? and 2) What is one word to describe their hopes for the next year? These comments were captured by the visual facilitator, as pictured below on the right.

Context Setting

Accomplishments

In pre-workshop interviews, Councilmembers were asked about major accomplishments. Key themes included appreciation for the professionalism of staff, the passage of the Bond measure, the fact that Levi's Stadium has begun to turn a profit, public safety, and opportunities created by the City's utility. The group then reflected on what makes them most proud and what contributes to the City's success, captured on the next page.

Councilmembers noted that the infrastructure bond passage signaled community trust in the government. In addition, a few Councilmembers noted the City's ability to strengthen its financial position over time.

Next, the facilitator reviewed some themes from the pre-workshop interviews with Councilmembers. There was a general sentiment that the City is in a good position, but a desire to find better alignment, recognize distinct roles between staff and Council, and strengthen the City's governance. Santa Clara has a number of large opportunities on its horizon, including the Super Bowl and planning for the FIFA World Cup. Additionally, the City has a number of economic development opportunities and will begin the implementation of the recently passed bond measure for infrastructure.

The City also faces some challenges, including addressing budget imbalances and enhancing financial sustainability, removing roadblocks to the permitting process, and maintaining quality service delivery.

Governing Together

Local government operates at the intersection of political acceptability—often driven by Council priorities—and administrative sustainability—what the organization has the capacity to accomplish. That intersection is where work is accomplished, and the greater the alignment between political acceptability and administrative sustainability, the greater the success and impact of the organization. During the discussion, the facilitator also referred to the iceberg metaphor, which demonstrates the vastness of the day-to-day work of the organization (under the water) compared to the visible portion, which typically includes Council priorities. Operating in the gap between political acceptability and operational sustainability, the City Manager plays the role of "bridge builder," and often relies on department heads to help fill the gaps.

Council Roles

In 2016, Kansas University professor emeritus Dr. John Nalbandian and former Raftelis Executive Vice President, Julia Novak collaborated with other local government thought leaders and identified six roles that a City Council must fulfill as they perform their duties and serve their community. While all Councilmembers play all these roles depending on circumstances, most have a natural tendency to gravitate toward certain roles. The facilitator reviewed these six roles, as presented below:

Governance Roles	Description
Strategic/Vision – Big Picture Thinker	• The focus here is on decisions that can have a significant impact on the City; it can be long-term or short-term. • Often focuses on the future and what might make a significant difference; sees possible connections and relationships; thinks beyond present data and constraints.
Trustee – Steward	• While listening to and respecting constituent views, the Trustee feels responsible to the City as a whole and to future residents. • The Trustee will make uncomfortable decisions that may run counter to constituent wishes because the decision is in the interest of the greater good.
Representative – Constituent Advocate	• In this role, the elected official acts as a "customer service representative." • The elected official is a conduit between residents and the City services. • Often, residents see this elected official as most responsive to their individual concerns.
Community Builder – Bringing People Together	• The elected official focuses on relationships and consensus-building. • The Community Builder fosters relationships and is able to work through differences. • Community is not just a casual word to the elected official who gravitates to this role.
Decision-Maker	• The decision-maker sees their role much like a judge—information is presented, and the decision-maker votes it up or down. • This is not an easy role, but often, it is a more passive role in contrast to that of the community builder.
Oversight	• The focus here is on the accountability of staff to the governing body. • In this role, the elected official may retain a measure of distance from the staff.

Each Councilmember then noted the roles they believe they gravitate toward most naturally.

Councilmember	Role(s)
Mayor Lisa Gillmor	Representative – Constituent Advocate and Community Builder
Albert Gonzalez	Representative – Constituent Advocate and Community Builder
Raj Chahal	Decision-Maker and Trustee
Karen Hardy	Representative – Constituent Advocate
Kevin Park	Representative – Constituent Advocate
Suds Jain	Strategic Vision
Kelly Cox	Strategic Vision and Oversight

Reflections

The group emphasized that they see value in all of the roles, and that at different times, each of them play different roles. They appreciated the framework as a way to better understand the various ways in which they serve the Santa Clara community. Additional reflections were captured by the visual facilitator, as shown below:

Ideal Governing Body

After a break, the group reflected upon what makes for an ideal governing body from different perspectives—the public, staff, and fellow Council members. A summary of the discussion is captured below:

Public

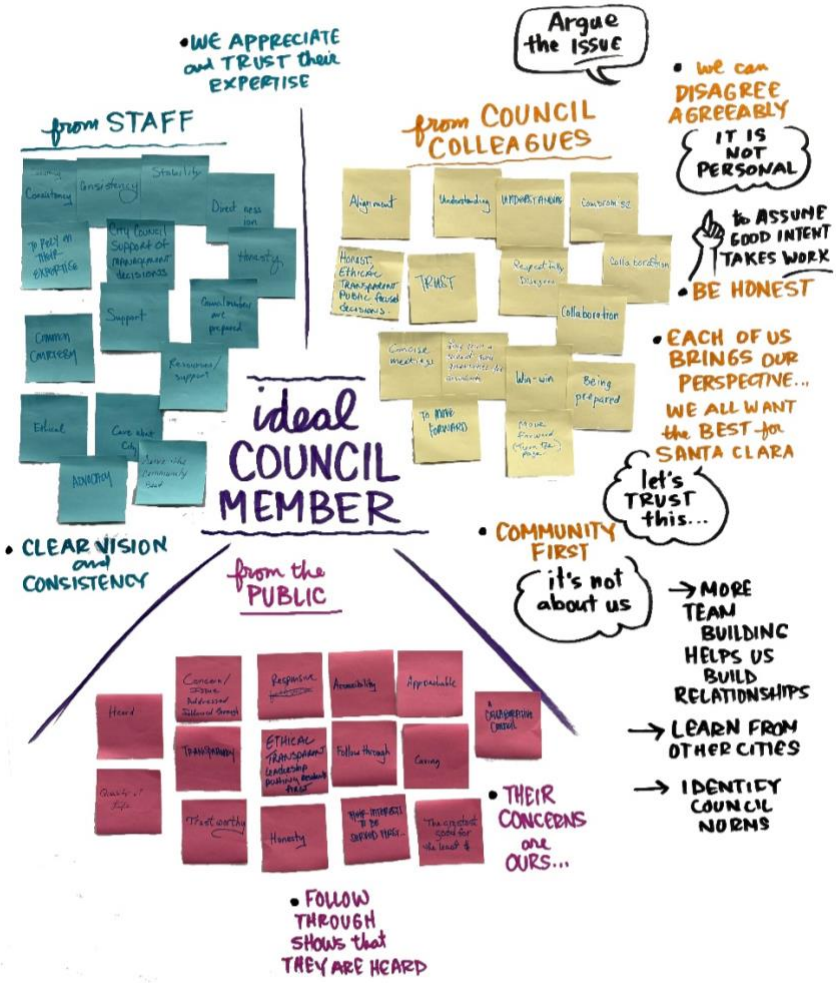
The ideal governing body, to the public, is responsive to their needs, transparent, and ethical. They serve the community's best interests responsibly and are accessible to their constituents.

Staff

From staff's perspective, the ideal governing body is supportive, consistent, and provides clear direction.

Council Colleagues

Fellow Councilmembers emphasized the importance of trust, understanding, collaboration, and respect while serving the community. They discussed their ability to "disagree agreeably," assuming good intent, and acknowledging that each individual wants the best for the Santa Clara community.



Full notes from the activity are captured in the table below. Asterisks represent repeated words.

Public	Staff	Council Colleagues
• Responsive • Heard • Concern/issue addressed, followed through • Transparency • Quality of life • Trustworthy • Ethical; transparent leadership putting residents first • Honesty • Accessibility • Follow through • Their interests are to be served first • Approachable • Caring • The greatest good for the least amount of money • Collaborative Council	• Consistency * • Stability • Directness, direction • Honesty • To rely on their experience • City Council support of management decisions • Support • Councilmembers are prepared • Common courtesy • Resources/support • Ethical • Care about City • Serve the community best • Advocacy	• Alignment • Understanding * • Compromise • Honest, ethical transparent public-focused decisions • Trust • Respectfully disagree • Collaboration * • Concise meetings • Long-term and current good governance for residents • Win-win • Being prepared • Move forward (turn the page) • To move forward

What Will This Governing Body Be Known For?

Finally, the Council reflected on what they hope this governing body will be known for, as captured below:

Organizational Update

City Manager Jovan Grogan provided an update on the Council's Pillars and Priority Areas of Focus. He also reviewed the 43 priorities identified during the 2024 Priority Setting Session. He provided a status update and proposed that "Baseline/Ongoing," "Underway," and "2024 New" items would be tracked as Council Referrals going forward, as they have been incorporated into staff workplans. Moving forward, staff will provide biannual updates on the Council Referrals.

Grogan then provided an overview of initiatives and projects occurring over the next six to 24 months across City departments.

2025 Priority Setting

Following lunch, Grogan reviewed staff's key focus areas for FY 2025-26. These included Measure I implementation, preparing for major events in 2026, economic development, fiscal sustainability, existing Council Priorities/Referrals, and existing organizational initiatives and projects.

The facilitator then reviewed the priorities that Councilmembers identified in pre-workshop interviews, as listed below:

- 2026 Major Event Planning
    - Super Bowl and FIFA Planning
    - Showcase Santa Clara
- Bond Measure implementation
- Economic development
    - Advance Downtown revitalization
    - Business growth and expansion
    - Process improvements
- Climate Action Plan
- Foundational priorities
    - Maintaining quality of life/core services
    - Financial sustainability

The facilitator organized the council's potential priorities by strategic focus area for purposes of discussion, as included on the following page. 2026 Major Events Planning spanned the full group across the bottom as an underpinning to the other priorities. The group then discussed these items, referring back to the Venn diagram between Political Acceptability and Administrative Sustainability. Councilmembers discussed 1) What success looks like?, 2) What do you hope to accomplish in the next year?, and 3) Is anything missing? They agreed on the following priorities for 2025.

Excellent City Government	Reliable Infrastructure	Outstanding Quality of Life	Thriving Community
Maintaining quality of life / core services Financial sustainability Prioritize services for those in need	Bond Measure implementation Maintain existing infrastructure	Climate Action Plan Parks and Recreation Master Plan	Business growth and expansion Process improvements Downtown revitalization Small business retention

2026 Major Event Planning: 1) Super Bowl and FIFA Planning and 2) Showcase Santa Clara

The council emphasized the importance of community engagement and education in all areas and unanimously agreed that the final set of priorities included above is most important for the next 12-18 months.

Following this discussion, Councilmembers were asked to share one thing they were most excited about. Many mentioned the City's efforts in preparing for the Super Bowl and FIFA World Cup, both of which will provide financial benefits, engage the community, and help "put Santa Clara on the map." Others mentioned the

greenhouse gas emission dashboard and other recreation priorities, such as the International Swim Center and Little League. Finally, Councilmembers noted that residents are aware of and are excited about upcoming bond projects.

What We Need From Each Other

Councilmembers and staff discussed what they need from each other in order to move the City forward. The elected officials noted that as the Super Bowl and FIFA World Cup approach, staff should keep in mind the importance of transparency. Staff expressed the significance of feeling valued and trusted for their expertise by members of the City Council.

Wrap-Up and Next Steps

As the session wrapped up, Councilmembers were asked to consider a headline they would like to see about the day's workshop. These headlines are captured below:

- Mayor Gillmor: Realistic and Doable Goals Identified
- Kelly Cox: Seamless collaboration in Santa Clara: Council zones in on the heart of the priorities
- Karen Hardy: Onward and upward
- Albert Gonzalez: Center of What is Possible – We continuously seek opportunities for the City to thrive
- Kevin Park: "Park had no comment"
- Suds Jain: Council Meeting ended before midnight

Mayor Gillmor then thanked her colleagues for their participation. Following the session, staff will work to integrate the direction received from Council into the City's budget preparation. City Manager Jovan Grogan noted that regular biannual updates will be prepared regarding Council Referrals, and a few items will reappear in Council's regular business meetings.