

Interview with Donald Williams, Mayoral Candidate --- October 13, 2022

Q. How long have you lived in Calistoga?

A. I moved here from San Francisco in 1974. After 48 years living in Calistoga and working throughout the valley, I have a pretty fair sense of the history and values and people of our town.

Q. What prompted you to run for council?

A. Five years ago, with many others, I objected to the council's process for determining water rates. We felt the rates were imposed without due regard for public input. We decided we needed to change the council to better respond to the public. After all, it's the public that is in charge—or at least it should be. I was elected, and really—it's been an honor to serve our community.

Q. And now you're a candidate for mayor?

A. Yes. The mayor is one of five council members, each with one vote on any issue. The mayor also conducts council meetings, has input on council agendas, and nominates applicants to various committees. Besides that, at grand openings the mayor wields the ceremonial scissors.

Q. Do you feel equal to that job?

A. Oh yes. I'm handy with tools! Much of my work was in construction, very blue-collar. I think a council is fortunate to have members from a variety of backgrounds. Our council members don't have to be professional politicians. But they should be well-grounded in local history and values. My tenure on council has been very educational. I've learned to navigate city hall, figure out how to help the public get what it wants.

Q. What other work experience do you bring to the job?

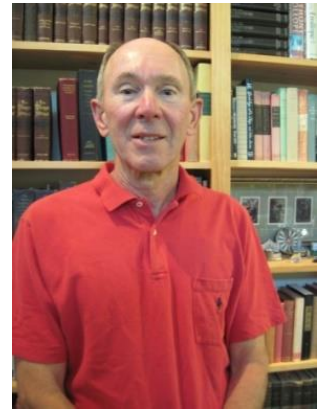
A. For 30 years I operated my flooring business. I also taught mathematics for almost 20 years at Napa Valley College. They are very different experiences and interests: construction, education, and now government. They help me see issues through very different lenses. For recreation I go another direction: 19th century novels. Often they talk about life in small towns.

Q. Bringing us back to Calistoga—you've brought up the small town concept before.

A. Yes. But it didn't originate with me. Our town's Vision Statement begins, "Calistoga will remain a small, walkable town..." There are dozens of references to its small-town quality throughout our General Plan. When I talk about it, I'm just being respectful of our guiding document. I'm also reflecting the sentiments of many of our residents.

Q. Then you're anti-growth?

A. A balance is needed, not a one-dimensional view. I avoid drastic heroic measures, such as a *total* ban on building, or *unrestrained* development. Artificially stimulated development seems contrary to the spirit of the General Plan. But if projects satisfy zoning and codes, let them proceed. (I supported the Indian Springs expansion for that reason.) If building is mandated by state laws, let it proceed. At the same time, abide by the council's own guideline—show a "preference towards smaller alternatives when feasible." And be mindful of our limits: water, traffic, emergency evacuation.



Q. What are your thoughts about business in Calistoga?

A. I believe in business; that's a way we take care of each other's needs. I want businesses in Calistoga to succeed. I want them to make a lot of money. I have 30 years' experience running my own business in Calistoga. I know what it's like in the private sector—to develop a market, manage employees, monitor a budget, provide a service or product, and hope for a profit—all while dealing with external vectors like competition and macro-economic forces.

In support of business and residents, four years ago I called for greater relief from high water bills. During the pandemic I advocated for elimination of the business license tax—a small tax, but hey, dollars were scarce for businesses then. The hospitality industry in particular suffered during the pandemic (as well as during the fires and recession). The city's budget was in jeopardy. So I developed a plan for diversifying our local economy. The council agreed and now offers funding to Calistogans who provide a service or product not otherwise readily available locally. I also wanted our council to remind the county to enforce its food ordinance at wineries, to protect Calistoga's and other cities' restaurants.

But I opposed spending money to market Calistoga, because it's not prudent to spend money where it won't make a difference. My analysis of data for the last decade showed no correlation between marketing expenditures and tourist tax revenue. External forces were the bigger factor in tax revenue.

Q. Did the council agree with you?

A. They didn't. But the discussion was respectful. They heard a credible alternative point of view. And it made a difference. The new marketing contract links payment to performance, meaning, if tax revenue declines, so does the city's payment to the marketing firm.

Q. You dissented from the council sometimes.

A. In the last four years there were maybe a score of dissenting votes—mostly mine, but still only about 3% of the time. However, every dissent represented some of the public. Each dissent gave hope to residents who might have felt unheard or unacknowledged. Not everyone in town thinks the same; why should anyone expect the council to always vote the same? Different ideas are a measure of true diversity, and that stimulates new ideas.

Q. Can you work with a council with diverse perspectives?

A. Certainly. I'm grateful for the service of every council member. Their ideas are important. Respectful, open, fair dialogue benefits our community. I look forward to that.

Q. What would you like the council to work on in the future?

A. The fairgrounds. It's an integral part of Calistoga. The public wants it restored to public use and so do I. Second, as I go door-to-door to voters' residences, I hear about water bills. Some trade-offs in the budget may be needed to respond to that issue.

Promoting economic diversity is also important. Not that it'll replace tourism, but it could be a good backup. And I agree with a Chamber report that public art is important and should be encouraged.

Maybe most important of all is engaging the public with the council. The council can't very well represent residents if it doesn't know what they want. To be good leaders we need to be good listeners.