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City Council Spotlight: Mayor of El Cerrito, Lisa Motoyama

El Cerrito, CA: The City of El Cerrito welcomes you to learn more about the elected officials who represent our community’s interests through our series of City Council spotlights. This month, we would like to recognize El Cerrito’s Mayor, Lisa Motoyama.

Mayor Lisa Motoyama wants residents to associate her term with initiatives to make El Cerrito greener, more fiscally responsible and safer for all residents. “In everything we do on Council, I want residents to recognize how much we love this City. In that same vein, I would encourage all residents to get involved with El Cerrito, just as I did.” Motoyama encourages residents to take note of the interesting work being done on the City’s advisory boards, commissions and volunteer groups, such as mural beautification, planning bike trips, advocating for transit, promoting fire safety and much more. “I’ve met so many people doing exciting things for the community; there must not be very many El Cerrito residents who aren’t giving back! There’s such an amazing amount of energy, care and devotion being expended to continue making our community wonderful, quirky, interesting and better.”

“In my first experience meeting with the City Council, I was sharply reminded by Janet Abelson (former El Cerrito Mayor and City Councilmember) that I must understand how El Cerrito strongly supported affordable housing, especially for the formerly homeless in the City. My positive working relationship with Janet and the City Council set the tone for how I would feel about El Cerrito. Shortly after that, my family and I moved here in 2005.” Motoyama first visited El Cerrito to participate in community meetings related to the Ohlone Gardens housing development, bringing her before the City Council to request project funding.

Once settled in El Cerrito, by a stroke of serendipity, Motoyama’s street was close to the Upper Fairmount Streetscape project, which included the Ashbury-Fairmount intersection. “Through collective action between neighbors and coordination with the City Council, we were able to help transform our two-way street nearby into a one-way, which really helped alleviate traffic and provided extra safety for those with mobility impairments.”

This experience prompted a neighbor to recommend Motoyama apply for the City’s Planning Commission. She ended up serving two terms. “Among the many joys of serving [on Planning Commission], you’re privy to hearing about what’s going on in the City and how you can better serve residents. It was a really fun experience,” said Motoyama. “A few friends hinted that I should run for City Council. When Janet Abelson suggested I run, I finally agreed and in 2020, with the help of a lot of friends and supporters, campaigning in the middle of the pandemic, I got elected.”

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When weighing the decision to run for Council, Motoyama asked herself: “Am I the right person to run, right now?” Seeing the City’s previous financial situation, with a negative fund balance, Motoyama knew she could help wrangle the budget into control with her expertise. “Over the course of the first two years on Council, I had no idea the number of hours we’d devote to addressing the budget,” recalled Motoyama. “All that hard work paid off, and today, we have a $16.6 million fund balance.”

During her term, Mayor Motoyama’s priorities serve as a continuation of her prior work with Council: budget maintenance and promoting the development of affordable housing and quality of life issues. With the internal work devoted to the City’s finances comes an equally important commitment to public transparency. To ensure year-round consideration, the budgeting process will now commence earlier to allow for ample public input. The first Budget Town Hall took place on April 22 at 10:00 a.m., and followed by City Staff presentations on May 9; the draft budget will be unveiled in the weeks thereafter. “With the work that we’re doing, the last thing we want is for us to reach the second budget Council Meeting in June and for a resident to say they haven’t seen it.”

Already, Motoyama spearheaded structural updates to City Council agendas to make information more accessible to residents. Working beside the City Clerk, she’s formed clear expectations for agenda processes, such as proclamations and time allocated for speakers, as well as moving up Council start time by an hour. “Before, you sometimes had to wait until 10 p.m. to get to the meatier, policy-based discussions that affect our community. Now, we’re able to make this important information more readily accessible to encourage community participation.” Mayor Motoyama also initiated a focused City Council retreat this year, enabling the group to discuss short and long-term legislative priorities.

In terms of the future of El Cerrito’s housing, the City is beginning the next regional housing needs cycle. While required by CA state law to provide 1,500 units, the City is hoping to deliver about 1,800 units alongside the development at the El Cerrito Plaza BART station and implementation of the San Pablo Avenue Specific Plan. “Our goal is to have our grand avenue look as beautiful as it can while supporting retail, housing, bus and bike lanes, pedestrian access and rain gardens,” said Mayor Motoyama. “We all see the potential. Once the interest rate environment and general economy improves, we’re hoping to restart a lot of this work.”

Mayor Lisa Motoyama first ran for El Cerrito City Council in 2020, bringing with her extensive professional experience in Bay Area localized affordable housing initiatives. Motoyama spent 15 years with Resources for Community Development, specializing as a Senior Project Manager then Director of Housing Development, Director of Acquisition and Preservation with the San Francisco Mayor’s Office of Housing and Development, and currently serves as a Senior Affordable Housing Finance Consultant with Community Economics, based in Oakland.

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