

Q&A with city council candidate Diana Rich

- By Rollie Atkinson, Sonoma West Staff
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Two seats on the Sebastopol City Council are up for election on Nov. 3. Both of the incumbents, Michael Carnacchi and Neysa Hinton are seeking re-election. Challengers in the race are Everett Fernandez, Diana Rich and Vaughn Richard Higginbotham. Sonoma West Times & News submitted questions to the candidates. Rich's responses are included here in a Q&A format.

The responses have been edited for length in some places.

All active, registered voters have been mailed ballots. Completed ballots can be returned by mail (if they are postmarked by Nov. 3) or dropped off at one of 20 secure ballot drop boxes in the County (as long as they are deposited before 8 p.m. on Nov. 3). There will also be 30 in-person voting locations open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Oct. 31 to Nov. 2., and from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m., Nov. 3. For a complete list of all ballot drop boxes and in-person voting locations, visit <https://sonomacounty.ca.gov/where-to-vote>.

Tell us a little bit about yourself — what should longtime and new Sebastopol residents know about you? What is one thing that folks who see you around town may not know about you?

I've lived here for 20 years. It's a small town, so many already know me. Some from seeing me around town as my husband and I raised our sons here, or at Fircrest Market or restaurants or as we walked our dog around town, or in the context of a gazillion volunteer projects I worked on or lead, or perhaps from my stint as executive director of the Sebastopol Community Cultural Center (2010-17).

After putting myself through college and law school, I married my husband Daniel, practiced law for a while, had children and landed here in Sebastopol, a town that feels like absolutely the right fit for us.

Should you be elected, how do you plan to stay engaged with the Sebastopol community?

My nature is collaborative. I love getting to know people and really listening to their thoughts and opinions. I've found that what might seem like divergent needs and interests can intersect in really productive ways by taking the time and effort to listen. And I've also learned that better results come from including a variety of perspectives in the decision-making mix. Staying engaged is essential to me. I've always been accessible, as anyone who knew me during my Community Center days knows. These days my approach will be broader, not just face-to-face (safe, socially distanced), cell phone (call/text), email, but also Zoom, and any other method that works for people.

Current city council members serve on a handful of other boards and subcommittees both across the county and in the city. Do you plan on representing the community on a similar scale? If so, how?

One of the many aspects of city council work that attracts me is the opportunity to be the voice of citizens by serving on city and county boards and subcommittees. I will definitely get involved at that level. Because I am now retired, I have plenty of time to commit to the city council position. One subcommittee of particular interest to me is the city finance subcommittee. Having run a nonprofit, I have specific skills and experience in the very difficult task of maintaining quality services on a limited budget. I know that fiscal responsibility is going to be a huge challenge to our town, and I'd want to lend my expertise to that subcommittee. But that's just one interest. My focus in Sebastopol will be broad attention to all aspects of the town, and I'll be willing to serve on any city or county board or subcommittee that affects Sebastopol and is of importance to us.

As cities, counties and states are wrestling with the current and future impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, what do you see as the city's role in helping combat the impact of the pandemic and resulting shelter-in-place orders?

COVID-19 has changed the entire world, including our small town. The core impact, in my opinion, is the affect it's having on our sense of hope and our confidence in our future. Our businesses and residents are struggling to find

money to cover the essentials of life. The bottom line is that we need to reinvigorate that sense of hope and confidence in our population. That's an essential foundation for moving forward productively. For us, in Sebastopol, the path to that goal is through engagement, collaboration and a renewed sense that we have a say in our local government, and can in that way control our future.

What are the top three issues you see the city having to address in the next year? In the next four years?

(1) City Services/Fiscal Responsibility: The need to be fiscally responsible in terms of the city budget, while still providing residents with quality services. The financial situation looks grim, with perhaps as much as a 25% drop in revenue. That's scary, given that our city budget was the smallest in the county even before COVID-19. This year will require close attention to prioritizing city services, with an eye to maintaining our core values, in everything that is done, and in every decision

(2) Social & Economic Stability for Businesses and Families: The need to bolster the social and economic stability of our businesses and residents in these starkly uncertain times (this raises sub-issues relating to business survival, distance learning, affordable housing, jobs for locals, natural resources, and more). The old solutions simply won't work. As to any one issue, as a general observation, there's a real need to identify the ways in which multiple needs intersect, so that in this new post-COVID world, we can serve the needs of all those who live and work here.

(3) Hope/ Communication/ Engagement: The need to re-invigorate the community's sense of hope and confidence in the future, to celebrate our strengths, and to engage residents in a way that empowers them and makes them essential in charting a path to the future

How we approach this issue is the lynchpin to success on all other issues. We are a community that needs to be heard and needs to be informed. We have seen this need come up recently in the contexts of the Sebastopol Inn, policing in Sebastopol and Black Lives Matter.

What do you think makes you a good fit for Sebastopol City Council?

I feel like everything I've experienced in my life has led me to this moment, preparing me for this particular task in this particular town. It helps that by nature I'm tolerant and appreciative and curious about all people, especially those who might be different in some way from me. It helps (thank you mom) that I have a deep-seated compassion and empathy for the amazing challenges people face, and patience for how those challenges can affect each of us.

As the Community Center Director, I became even more familiar with the needs and wants of Sebastopol and developed working relationships with city staff and the city council, and fine-tuned my leadership and management skills. Running a nonprofit gave me a profound understanding of the challenging balance between quality services and limited funds. My handling of the Community Center's finances was responsible, leaving the organization fiscally secure. That was hard work, and I learned much from it that will help me address the budget challenges facing our town today and into the future. As I look back on my lifetime of experience and skill development, it seems that all of it has prepared me for this moment, when Sebastopol needs what I have to offer.

Is there anything else you believe readers should know about you or your platform?

I love Sebastopol. I love its quirky unique small-town charm. I love how insistent we all are about being involved in our community. I love our values, and the need we have to make sure that our town aligns with our shared values. Everything about this town resonates with me. Now, as this town that I love is facing huge challenges, I feel compelled to step up and offer my skills and experience to help us move through this new era successfully. I am hopeful that the people of Sebastopol will give me that opportunity by electing me to the city council. It would be an honor and a privilege to serve my town in that capacity. For more information, feel free to check out my website: www.electdianarich.com.