

Diana Rich – Sebastopol City Council Q&A

By Laura Hagar Rush, Townsy Media, October 2, 2020

Retired attorney and nonprofit administrator Diana Rich has lived in Sebastopol for 20 years. She and her husband raised their two boys here, and it was in Sebastopol that Rich discovered her love of working with nonprofits, a passion that led to her seven-year tenure as director of the Sebastopol Community Cultural Center. Rich, who studied Spanish at UC Santa Cruz and got her law degree from UC Davis, had a peripatetic youth, and her description of her early life was so interesting that we are reproducing it here verbatim.

Where were you raised?

My mom was a bit of a wanderer (and Bohemian). She moved my brother and me all over the place. She was American, but in the late 50s went to Spain with my father (a writer), where they joined a small group of artsy Americans. I was born on the island of Ibiza, Spain, where we lived (sun, sand, quiet island life) until I was five years old. My mom and dad split up, with my mom taking us back to the US.

We lived in Southern California until I was about 12, in a different rental house each year, camping during the summers. Addresses were generally Topanga Canyon, Venice, and Santa Monica, with a notable departure to San Blas Mexico for about a year (home-schooling? probably un-schooling really, before it was a “thing”).

My brother and I were latchkey kids before there was a name for it. We were fine, though, very self-sufficient and resilient, and always confident in the knowledge that no matter how dire finances might be, our mom loved us and would always be there for us.

As I was going into junior high, my mom went through bankruptcy and moved my brother and me to Montana, hoping her parents would take us in. That did not work out as she had hoped. We stayed in Montana, in a variety of locations: Mill Iron (East of the divide, cow country, where my brother and I were two of five students in a one-room school house, with my mom as the teacher), St. Ignatius (Flathead Kootenai reservation), and Missoula (where I attended Hellgate High School).

I left home at age 17 to drive to California because I wanted to go to a UC. I ended up in Santa Cruz, where I worked a number of jobs (paper delivery, waitressing, retail) as I established residency to attend college.

What have I done for a living?

I have worked since I was 14 years old. I was raised by a single mom and learned early that working hard and earning my own funds was essential for survival. As a young person, my primary fallback job was waitressing, but I have also (at various times) delivered newspapers, worked in retail, taught English to Spanish-speaking business people, and worked as a private investigator.

Once I entered law school, I worked at law firms during the summers, then at the public defender’s office in Stockton, and then at a series of law firms: Weissburg & Aronson, Foley Lardner, and Orrick Herrington Sutcliffe.

When we came to Sebastopol (1999) I took some time off, but quickly became involved in volunteer work for a variety of nonprofits, primarily in leadership roles. From 2010-2017 I took a paid position as the Executive Director of Sebastopol Community Cultural Center. Since 2017 I have been retired. And now, I am SO ready to jump back into a full time commitment!

What are the top three problems facing the city of Sebastopol and what would you do about them?

RICH: My priorities will be core city services, fiscal responsibility, families and seniors, natural resources, local businesses, jobs for locals, civic pride & identity, walkability, cycling, outdoor activity, smart and responsible

growth, and emergency preparedness, all within the overarching goal of a Sebastopol that is safe and healthy, vital and vibrant, connected and inclusive, and meets the needs of all residents.

As to the top three problems, I answer this question with one very important caveat: Before I settle on the top three items to address if I am elected to the city council, I will be turning to the electorate to find out how they would answer this question. It's wrong, from my perspective, to put energy into pursuing solutions without first confirming that the right problem has been identified. I answer this question with that cautionary statement in mind, informed by the many conversations I've had as I've been campaigning for this position.

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 very decision. It will also require close attention to available county and state funding sources, and maintenance of effective communications with our board of supervisors.

The good news is that the city has built a substantial reserve over the past few years, which will allow a temporary bridge as we do our work to come up with new and creative ways to bolster our revenues. (See comments below regarding Economic Stability.)

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). Our success in addressing these issues will rely on our ability to think creatively in terms of our options. The old solutions simply won't work. But once we recognize that limitation, new options naturally arise. 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. (Sub-issues here are distance learning challenges, information flow to and from the community, family and senior engagement, social injustice, policing, the Sebastopol Inn issue, civic pride & identity, walkability/cycling/outdoor activity, and more.)

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. These situations have confirmed that we need to engage our population in productive decision-making even more than has been done in the past.

This can have multiple positive results: a sense of hope for what the future holds, a reduction in the general sense of powerlessness that many are experiencing, and a reduction in the sense of isolation for our residents, not to mention the possibility of producing strong workable solutions to address our current and future issues.

What is the most important issue in Sebastopol right now?

RICH: The most important issue in Sebastopol right now is our sense of lost hope for the future. That issue runs through all the others. Without hope for our future, we lose our will to address in a productive and energetic way all the challenges we face. We need to embrace this new era, recognize the changes it brings, and be creative about using our West County resources to deal with those changes.

Here in Sebastopol we have a goldmine that we have not tapped: The many retirees who have a wealth of knowledge and expertise, as well as lots of free time, and are just waiting to contribute to our town. That's where we need to turn, for creative, pragmatic solutions to our challenges today and into the future. Recognizing that we have that very special resource gives us a reason to celebrate, be proud of our town, and embrace our future.

If you got a \$2 million grant to help the city of Sebastopol, how would you use it?

RICH: The most important commitment I have is to engage residents...to communicate rather than make assumptions. If the city of Sebastopol were fortunate enough to receive an unencumbered \$2 million grant, the first task (from my perspective) would be to figure out what Sebastopol residents wanted. From a city council perspective, my plan would be to provide useful information about options, as well as opportunities for open discussion, and fashion a process for sorting through the practical choices, prioritizing with input from the community and city staff, and then reporting back to the community in order to quickly move forward with a plan that recognized the needs and voices of everyone involved.

In terms of what I see as priorities, that's the response I provided to the first question above. But please know that those priorities have not yet been "curated" by the public. The voice of the citizens of Sebastopol is what is most important to me, and if I am fortunate enough to be elected to the City Council, the electorate's needs and voices will be most important to me.

Looking at the work of the current city council, what issue do you think they've done a good job on and what issue have they, well, not done such a great job on?

RICH: As I've talked to people during my campaign, the one issue that comes up regularly is the need for more engagement, communication and involvement in decision-making. That's arisen in the context of the Sebastopol Inn, the Black Lives Matter mural, and policing. With all the uncertainties we face, it's essential that we communicate and engage more fully with the people of Sebastopol. That engagement will help the city council make better decisions for the people of Sebastopol.

How have you served the community in the past and how do you think that experience will inform your work on the city council?

RICH: Again, I'd refer you to my website, where I've got substantial detail listed regarding my service to this community: www.electdianarich.com. The driving element here is that I love Sebastopol. I fell in love with it immediately, and wanted to contribute immediately. It really is our family's dream "forever-home." My volunteer resume is lengthy, and includes Rotary, youth sports, parent teacher organizations and foundations, youth employment, emergency preparedness, the local health action initiative, and much more. My roles have included everything from grass roots level jobs to high-level leadership responsibilities.

What three things do you love about Sebastopol?

RICH: I love everything about Sebastopol. To ask me to choose three is to ask the impossible. Some highlights: the people (quirky, charming, opinionated, vocal, caring, compassionate, wonderful); the small town character (a town where everyone really can know everyone); the rural aspect (deer that wander our yards, piglets in the street, the rooster that starts crowing at dawn (yes!), SO many people who give me apples and figs and eggs and...), the amazing resources we have in terms of retired people with expertise and open time... Those are just a few of the things I love about Sebastopol. The full list is very, very long...

What accomplishment in your life are you most proud of and how did you make that happen?

RICH: The accomplishment that probably makes me most proud is leading the Sebastopol Community Cultural Center as its executive director. I really wanted that job and was trying to re-enter the workforce in a paid position after being home with my sons for about 10 years. They were both in high school, and it was time for me to get a job. I didn't want to go back into legal work, and by then had realized how much I loved nonprofit work. I knew I was qualified for the ED position.

As I look at it now, everything I had done up until then had been moving toward that job – my volunteer work locally, my background and experience as a lawyer, and my skillset in general. The only additional step I took was to fill in what I saw as a gap in my background: the financial piece – which I did by taking classes at SRJC. After that I felt I had what it would take to do well in that position.

Of course, nothing worth getting is ever easy (as I've learned again and again). I ended up applying twice before I was selected. I loved that position, and for seven years had the joy of serving this community in that capacity.

And now, as I write this, I realize that all of that, leading to today, is what propelled me to the decision to run for city council. It feels once again like all that has come before has prepared me for this new challenge!

What were the three values most emphasized in your home when you were growing up and how will they inform your work on the council?

RICH: The three values most emphasized when I was growing up were the importance and value of hard work, commitment to a strong ethical and moral code, and compassion, curiosity, and appreciation for others. These values have always been driving forces in my life, affecting everything I do. They will serve the same foundational role for me if I am elected to the city council. These are values that drive my need to collaborate, engage, listen, and be there, no matter what, for my community.

What personal characteristics do you possess that would make you a good council person?

RICH: I've been told that I'm an excellent solution-oriented problem-solver, a creative thinker that can see solutions that others might not envision. I know myself to be collaborative, inclusive, and accessible. I've always been pragmatic, organized, well prepared, and logical. My life has presented me with enough challenges that I instinctively appreciate and have compassion for the challenges faced by others. I have a deep-seated interest in listening to and understanding opinions that differ from my own, and over the years I've learned that better-decision making comes from that process. Finally, I have never been a one-issue or one-interest person. All those characteristics (I think) would make me a good councilperson.

Who's already backing you and who have you been endorsed by?

RICH: I am so pleased with the variety and number of endorsements I've received. I value every one. The full list of over 200 is on my website: . Listed at the top are the elected officials who have endorsed me: Supervisor Lynda Hopkins, Mayor Patrick Slayter, and Council Member Sarah Glade Gurney. Organization endorsements include Sebastopol Tomorrow, the Sierra Club, North Coast Builders Exchange, the Engineering Contractor's Association, Sonoma County Conservation Action, and another that I'm not yet at liberty to identify. The individual endorsements are just as important to me, because they represent a wide range of people, each of whom I respect immensely, and each of whom has stepped up to state publicly their belief in my ability to serve this community. That speaks to me in a very personal and meaningful way.

Every city council person gets \$500 to spend on a pet project for the community: how would you spend yours?

RICH: There are so many choices. I'll decide based on what I learn as I sit on the city council. Near and dear to my heart are youth interests, business, the environment, seniors, community engagement...and so much more. I'll look for an interest where the expenditure can have the maximum benefit. I've always been a big fan of collaborative efforts, which means I can definitely see trying to find an opportunity that would match this contribution with contributions by others. But the answer to this question is yet to be determine.

If you are not elected, how would you try to help work on ideas or issues that are important to you?

RICH: I will continue to serve the community in any capacity needed. That's what I've always done, and that's what I'll be doing for as long as I have the pleasure of living in this fabulous town.

Find out more at www.electdianarich.com.