

## **Editorial: Like nation, Walnut Creek confronts economy, racial justice**

### **Wilk, Haskew and Reese would bring strongest balance of financial acumen and social awareness to the City Council**

Officials in Walnut Creek, the economic center of Contra Costa County, are locally confronting two major national issues — the economic downfall from the coronavirus pandemic and the quest for more racially equitable treatment from law enforcement.

Voters in the Nov. 3 election will choose three City Council members to address these challenges. Of the eight candidates, political newcomer Kurtis Reese and incumbents Kevin Wilk and Loella Haskew would bring the strongest balance of financial acumen and social awareness to the council.

To its credit, the current council moved quickly to address the budget gaps created by the recession. About 30% of the city's revenues usually come from sales tax revenues. When those plummeted with the onset of the pandemic, officials began making major cuts.

Now, the \$79 million budget for the current fiscal year is 13% less than the one approved last year. The equivalent of about 19 full-time positions were eliminated or reduced. Top managers took pay cuts, and unionized workers were furloughed for eight days. Extra library hours were cut. And funding for community groups was trimmed 14%.

About \$6 million of reserves were tapped to balance the prior and current fiscal years, which was possible because the city has a long history of maintaining strong reserves and minimal debt.

Meanwhile, city officials and community members continue to grapple with the fallout from last year's fatal police shooting of 23-year-old Miles Hall, a Black man with mental health issues. It was the first fatal police shooting since 2012.

Police said Hall ran at officers with a crowbar and had earlier threatened his own relatives. But video released by police seems to show that Hall was not running directly at police and was not threatening them with the metal bar.

The case is still under investigation by the Contra Costa District Attorney's Office, but the video indicates the fatal shooting could and should have been avoided. The tragedy has prompted needed discussion about police procedures, racial bias and proper responses to calls involving people with mental health issues.

For Reese, this has been personal. He and his wife are close friends with Hall's parents. The fatal shooting of their son prompted Reese to get involved in Walnut Creek politics, becoming a key member of the police chief's new community advisory board.

Reese, who has an MBA and works as an IT manager for a Salesforce global operations team, brings a thoughtful and measured approach not only to the issue of police reform, but also to the city's financial challenges.

Incumbents Wilk and Haskew have been part of the council's sage budget management. They both understand that the city needs to take steps to ensure there's not another similar death.

Justin Wedel, the third incumbent running, continues to concern us with his rigid positions that can leave him as the lone dissenter on the council. As we said four years ago, divergent opinions are important, but they should be expressed constructively.

As for the other candidates, we hope to see former Planning Commissioner Cindy Darling continue her involvement in city politics. She has a lot to offer, both in knowledge and temperament.

Lauren Talbert declined to participate in our interview process. Michael Samson lost us with his insistence that the city cut the Police Department budget in half, an idea that former county grand juror Hailey Ayres said she would consider.

While there are good arguments to be made for redirecting some money for mental health and homeless experts who need not be sworn officers, a cut in the police budget of that size is not realistic and not in keeping with the tenor of the community.

Walnut Creek is struggling with complex issues affecting communities across the country. And, like elsewhere, the city needs thoughtful leaders who can step out of their rigid positions to craft nuanced solutions. Wilk, Haskew and Reese are the best candidates for that.